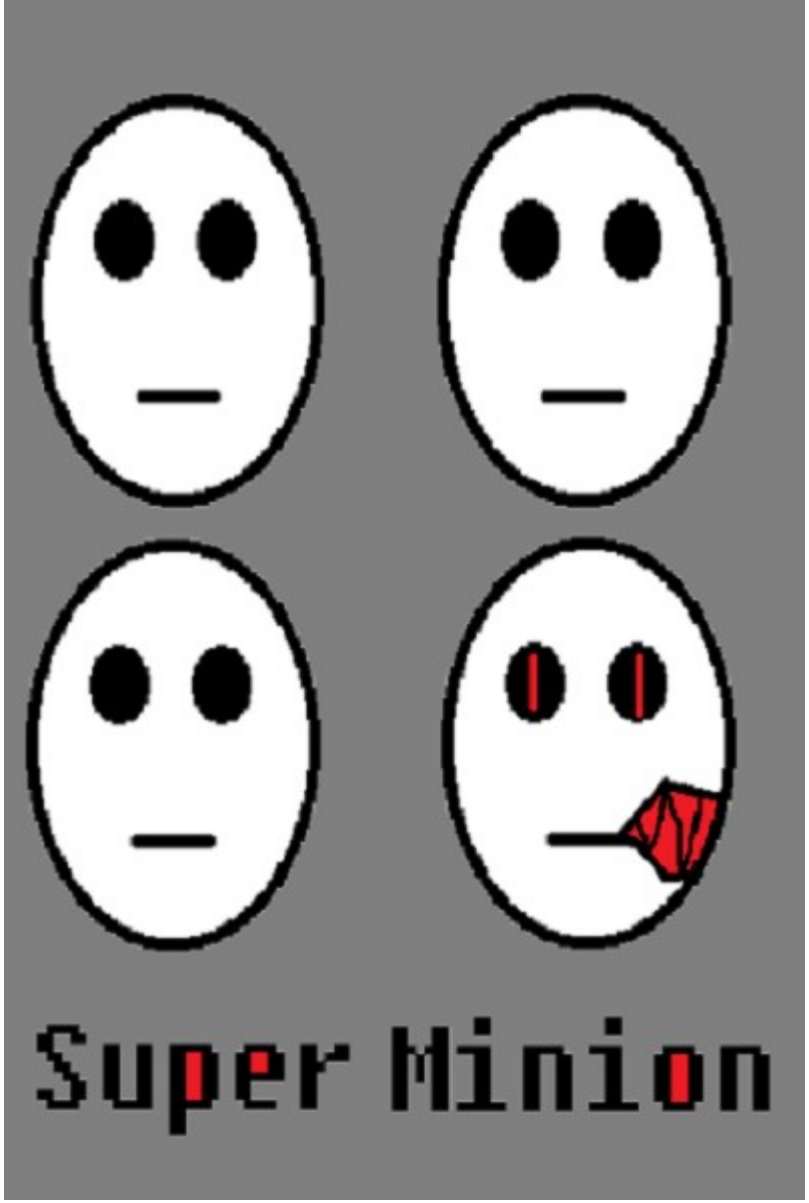
SUPER
MINION


Super Minion

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Ch1 Taste Test

Handshaking success- downloading...

Scanning...

Reformatting...

Installing...

Running Human.exe

The room I was in felt a lot smaller all of a sudden, although it hadn't changed. I was facing the reinforced door that exited into the test chambers. To my left and behind me the walls were blank. To my right the wall was transparent, allowing an unobstructed view of where the drones constantly fiddled with this or that device.

But drone wasn't really the right word for them was it.

I did a quick check of my facilities. Agreeing to that strange contact and download had been a large risk, but it had promised to provide what I needed, and my need was desperate. So far it seemed to have no negative effects at least. All systems returned green.

I glanced at the drone room, currently empty. The drones always appeared in cycles, currently it was the middle of what I assumed was a rest cycle, even the drones who normally worked late had left.

I passed a glance over all the devices and objects in the drone room. It was possible they could prove useful later on, but I did not know enough about their purpose currently. They hadn't been something I ever paid much attention to before, a mistake I was now regretting. Until now I had barely noted the drone movements to predict the time until my next meal, or the next test. Unusual information had been purged to save on energy and resources. Now I realized that focusing on the drones and their actions would prove pivotal in my future actions.

Accepting that communication and download was already paying in dividends.

For now I would need to bide my time, I needed more information to put any real plans into action. I decided to shut down the new program until the next drone cycle started. As amazingly useful as it was, it was also rather resource intensive.

Human.exe ended;

Compiling results...

Saving Human.exe to CoreMemory...

Drone detected: initiating Human.exe

The first drone to come in was always the same one. Drones had two legs on which they stood upright supporting a torso, had two appendages on either side of the torso they used to manipulate

objects, and had a final appendage on top which seemed to house all their sensory organs. In addition all drones wore strange coverings that changed every cycle, except for a long white covering attached to the torso that extended to their legs, all drones wore that covering.

The drone who always came in early was identifiable by the short, white fur on its sensory appendage, and a small device it kept balanced on the organ in the middle of its face that hooked over to either side. Several drones wore these actually. Perhaps it was a mark of rank? The drones were definitely autonomous, and would need some kind of hierarchy to keep organized.

Slowly the rest of the usual drones filtered in and began to work their usual routine. This time I paid more attention than usual to what they were doing, both what they were working on and how they interacted with each other. The white furred one was definitely a leader, though it seemed the other workers weren't that much farther down the hierarchy. Their interactions seemed too relaxed, and the leader participated in the conversations as an equal until something needed to be changed.

I couldn't make out what they were saying to each other though. The transparent wall blocked both sound and any pheromones they might be transmitting. What I could tell was that they were compiling data of some kind. There were tons of symbols on the devices they used, and more on thin pieces of white material they kept in storage units that opened with a pull. External data storage of some kind that anyone could access, clever. I would love to have some time to learn the symbols in detail.

The drones continued like this for a while, but eventually they approached positions I recognized and the light came on above the test chamber door. With a slight hiss the door opened a few

heartbeats later, and like I had many times before I shuffled forward into the test chamber.

The new room was nearly identical to my den room, the main differences being the mesh that covered the transparent wall and a grate in the floor where biological waste could be sluiced into. I had long since learned not to try and slip past the grate.

Painful.

Today it looked like we were starting with a combat test. Across from me stood a large cage in which was held a large creature. It stood on four strong legs that supported a very large torso, each leg ended in a clawed foot, and it was entirely covered in brown fur. This particular specimen had several devices and materials grafted to its head. I knew from previous experience that the claws could be devastating, and the fur was thick enough that bludgeoning and slashing would not be very effective. You needed to stab for the vitals.

Normally combat tests were my favorite as I was normally allowed to eat whatever creature I fought for the test. Puzzle tests were okay, though they gave less nutrients as a reward, and danger avoidance tests were the worst. If I messed up badly enough in those the reward would not make up for lost resources, and I would be given only the minimum amount to maintain mass.

This particular test was... disadvantageous. Currently I supported my main body low to the ground, with six stubby but flexible legs. A solid shell covered me, and my sensory organs and a pair of combat claws poked out from under the front end. I had a lot of success with this form, but against a brown-fur (I had fought them often enough to designate them) it would become a pummeling match, with my

opponent trying to batter or flip my shell while I battered at its legs and tried to force it to the ground where I could then attack its primary sensory appendage. Brown-furs were nutritious enough that I would probably recover what I lost, but the waste...

Maybe there was something I could change quickly? I had about 60-90 heartbeats before the cage opened if previous testing experience held true.

My end goal was to destroy its primary processing organ, which brown-furs always kept in their sensory appendage (stupidly I might add, it made them predictable). Normally I had to inefficiently batter at their limbs until their endurance crumbled, a waste of energy. Stabbing was more effective, but I couldn't risk the time it took to change my claws in the off chance the brown-fur flipped me in the middle of shifting.

I wanted to stab. I wanted to stab the processing organ. I wanted to conserve as many resources as possible.

Maybe if I changed just one claw for the task?

Estimate: 45 heartbeats left.

My claws were already flooded with micro units, and I increased the nutrient flow into my left claw. Currently it was shaped for both bludgeoning, and crushing with a sharpened edge. What I needed was a long, thin, fast, piercing claw.

As the changes started I could feel my limb heat up as the micro units went to work, I was sacrificing efficiency for speed.

Estimate time until completion: 120 heartbeats.

Damn, and as predicted the cage door unlocked within two heartbeats of the predicted time.

I held still as the door swung open and the brown-fur exited the cage, sometimes if you made no movements the brown-furs would take their time before walking over. No such luck this time. It must have been hungry as it ambled over almost immediately, then stopped and sniffed to see what it was dealing with.

Normally I would take this opportunity to land a free hit on its sensory appendage while it tried to scent me. This time I remained perfectly still, my legs hunkered down and my shell touching the floor. Brown-furs were a terror once they decided to start moving, but they could be decidedly lazy when they thought they had a free meal, and I needed every extra moment I could get.

Estimate time until completion: 95 heartbeats.

It started to paw at my shell, then gave it a good smack with its limb. The chitin that made up my shell screeched as the edge dragged across the floor. In response I lifted my right claw and snapped it as close to its face as I could, I didn't want to actually hit it and drive it to anger, I wanted to make it cautious.

No such luck, it swiped at my claw and then tried to circle around me. I turned quickly to stay facing it and waved my claw to keep it at bay. This was more effective when I had two claws and could distract with one and attack with the other, this plan better pay off. I doubted the brown-fur could truly kill me (few combat tests actually involved real risk to my core, the drones would stop the test before that happened), but if the plan didn't work the waste of resources would be obscene. The drones didn't reward failure.

And I was going to need those resources for later.

The brown-fur smacked my shell *hard*. I could feel the vibrations as its claws scratched the chitin and left marks. I responded with my own claw

Estimate time until completion: 82 heartbeats.

I needed to shift faster! Most of the ligaments were ready, but I was being held up by the chitin and muscle, I couldn't condense the large claw into the shape I wanted fast enough. I needed it to be thinner and with a sharp point.

The brown-fur got a good hit on my shell, I heard the crack and saw a small piece go flying away, not good at all.

But it gave me an idea.

I needed to reduce mass on the claw... what if I simply shed the extra

parts on purpose? It was wasteful true, and I had never before intentionally wasted resources, but if the plan worked the net gain would still be tremendous. Maybe I could even incorporate the detaching parts to get something out of them? I modified the design I was working on.

Estimate time until completion: 23 heartbeats.

This would work! I started to shuffle backwards, away from the brown-fur, forcing it to follow me on all fours and giving me a brief respite from its attacks. I paid close attention to its sensory organs, the left eye was covered by armor and the eye itself replaced with a strange device. Where the flesh met material the skin looked rough and red, like it was irritated and improperly fused. Details like this never meant much to me before, but I wondered now if the brown-fur had not in fact modified itself like I had, and instead had been grafted by an outside party. Most likely the drones.

Inferior design.

And I would prove that now.

Shift completed.

I continued to walk backwards, waiting for an opening. It caught up when I slowed down a little, and raised a limb up to give me a smack. I struck, my now limber left claw came forward fast and I detached the extra parts, the opposable top 'prong' of the claw in particular was thrown forward and struck one of the back legs of the brown-fur. It flinched, bringing both its forelegs onto the ground and

its sensory appendage with them. I struck again, my left claw was now more a needle, the bottom prong long, thin, and sharp, and I drove it into the brown-fur's unmodified right eye, deep into its primary processing organ.

Then I wrenched it back and forth, as hard and as fast as I could. The brown-fur crumpled in a heap, no longer able to send coherent signals to its twitching limbs. I reached with my larger right claw, designed for crushing, and used it to sever the sensory appendage from the rest of the body, a spray of blood accompanied it. Unless this specimen was massively different (which I doubted based upon past encounters with brown-furs), it was now truly dead.

It worked! My plan worked! I implemented a plan thought up in heartbeats, on the fly, and using techniques I hadn't thought to use before. And now I could savor my prize.

I let the severed appendage drop to the floor and stabbed my needle arm into the brown-fur's main body, flooding it with micro units. The first thing to do was salvage and convert as many of the brown-fur's micro units as possible before they self destructed, they usually detected that their host flesh was dead in around fifty to sixty heartbeats. Then came gathering of any essential or perishable materials, and finally gathering of raw materials, specifically the energy rich storage cells. I set about consuming the corpse with gusto.

Success:Satisfaction

Incoming command: return to den room;

What? NO! I wasn't finished!

But it didn't matter, already my micro units were withdrawing to my own body. The drones had sent the command and it must be obeyed. I wanted to at least take the corpse with me, but it was too heavy, and I couldn't, physically couldn't, delay to try and cut off a few pieces. I had to settle for the severed sensory appendage and whatever my needle arm dragged from the wound, practically nothing. My legs carried me back to my den and then the door sealed shut behind me. I returned to the middle of the room and sat in the designated placement. I seethed.

Then I watched the drones. They were in a frenzy of activity, excitedly communicating with one another, watching their devices as symbols appeared in endless cascades. Whatever the drones wanted from these tests I had apparently given to them in excess this time.

I should have expected this, in my exuberance over my victory and newfound ability I had forgotten. These tests weren't something I could win. The drones would test and test and cared not for me, only my role as a test subject. When I accepted the unfamiliar communication and downloaded the strange code it hadn't been out of curiosity, or a desire to improve myself, those emotions hadn't truly existed until afterwards. I accepted the code because I had no choice, because simple calculation told me that the tests would eventually kill me no matter how I improved, because something had to change and the strange code was the only chance I had of escaping this assured destruction.

I watched the drones. I ate my tiny morsel. I seethed.

Ch2 More Than You Can Chew

During the next cycle the drones tried to discover what had caused the change in my behavior, sending a command code for me to transmit a copy of CoreMemory. They had done this many times in the past when I updated my behavior and I anticipated it this time. Before they sent the command I dumped all information, including the code, for Human.exe into my organic processing cells, then wiped everything about it from CoreMemory. They sent the command, I sent a copy (with a small new combat protocol to throw them off), I then reinstalled Human.exe. Annoying, but easily done, and necessary to hide my new abilities.

Next, testing started up again. As predicted the tests were more difficult than before.

Puzzle tests were the easiest to deal with since my new mind handled problem solving more fluidly than ever before. Puzzles that used to stump me were now trivial to solve, my mental ability exponentially higher.

I failed these tests intentionally. The meager rewards no longer worth my effort.

The survival tests were harder. I needed to fail these tests, but not in

a way in which I lost resources. I allowed myself to be physically impaled, sliced, or crushed, rather than burned or zapped.

Especially zapped, that actually hurt.

But in the combat tests I allowed myself to do well. I focused on using the same strategy as before, stabbing at vital organs using a needle appendage. If I slowly absorbed tiny morsels of flesh and blood from my opponents with each stab, who would know? Well, the drones most likely, but for now they hadn't seemed to notice.

So it was that the combat tests increased in frequency, as the drones believed them the key to my improvement. My mass steadily increased.

A safe routine established, there were now two problems to solve: getting rid of the drones' ability to command me, and escaping my cage in a way that didn't involve a risk to my life.

I already had an idea in my mind for the commands, for now what I needed was a way to leave the facility. I drew inspiration for planning from my favored combat strategy of providing a distraction,

then striking when my opponent had lost focus. To escape, I planned to distract, then slip past them unnoticed.

Hopefully.

On a previous test (before I had received Human.exe), my opponent had accidentally cracked the transparent wall between the test chamber and the room the drones occupied, the wire mesh was installed after this incident. When I started looking for methods of escape I tested the translucent wall myself, scratching the surface of the wall in my den once all the drones had left. It was strong material true, but I found it was easy to shave off a sliver using the micro units. Whatever the clear wall was made from, the material was easily dismantled without much force. I would be able to enter the drone sections without much trouble.

Now, finding a suitable distraction was slightly more troublesome. The best option was one of my fellow test subjects, but they were most likely interred in their own den rooms, or at least I assumed they were, I had never seen their dwellings, and I didn't know how to find them without breaking down doors and alerting the drones.

No perfect solution, I would have to make a few backup plans and hope opportunity allowed one of them to work. I began to pay extra attention to the drones and the section they occupied. Even the tiniest detail might make or break my chances of success, and despite

my new mental savvy I preferred to go at this with a complete plan. My safety was too important to do anything less.

The next few cycles passed without incident, I killed and gained mass, analyzed the drones, and tried to get through the tests without using too many resources.

Until finally an opportunity presented itself.

I was fighting two yellow-furs. They were quite similar to the brown-furs, but were smaller, sleeker, faster, and their front legs sported an assembly of sharp claws that would rip flesh and leave it a ragged mess. While I had never faced two at once before I wasn't having much difficulty. I was still using a chitin shell as my primary defense which lessened the threat of the claws, and yellow-furs simply didn't have the pure strength that a brown-fur would use to crush my exoskeleton. The only real changes I had made to myself over the last few tests was changing my legs from six small limbs to four longer and stronger versions, and changing my bludgeoning right claw to be better for gripping. This allowed me to angle my shell better, and I would aim to grab my opponents before stabbing them with my left claw. As a special side benefit the faster movement of my new combat style helped disguise the fact that I was now much heavier than I had been only a few cycles ago.

As we fought one of the yellow-furs made a mistake: it tried to attack

my front immediately after its partner had just been deflected by my shell and slipped. With its partner stumbling for a few heartbeats my right claw was freed up from defense and I used it to bash the attacking yellow-fur atop its head, sending it to the floor. It only took a moment to stab it in the neck, right where nutrient flow to its processing organ was highest, and I ripped out my needle violently to cause more trauma. It lost blood pressure quickly after that and collapsed. A wound that small wouldn't have killed me.

Inferior design

I fended off the second yellow-fur until its partner stopped twitching. They had been doing rather well, attacking in concert and forcing me to defend against two targets, but it was just a matter of time now. It took a cautious swipe at my eyes and I blocked with my claw, forcing it back with the needle. It tried to circle me and I let it, but when it attacked I spun and knocked its attack aside, its claws failing to gain traction on my shell, and it earned a thin slice along its foreleg from my needle for its trouble. This seemed to make it desperate and it tried a flurry of attacks against my claws themselves, perhaps trying to cripple them, but it just didn't have enough raw strength and instead its claws were briefly caught in the chitinous joints of my limbs. My right claw moved and I managed to pinch a portion of its sensory appendage, ripping away a lot of flesh and mushing its left eye a bit. This caused it to retreat, yowling the entire time. I planned to slowly follow after it, my victory was assured so I might as well play it safe.

But then something anomalous occurred. It halted for a few

heartbeats and I thought it was close to death, but then its wounds started to close rapidly. It was a technique I often used myself to prevent blood loss, but the speed at which it performed this was astounding, it must have been burning through its entire energy stores in a last ditch effort. None of my opponents to date had displayed such rapid regeneration.

I moved forward and stabbed it, a deep wound where its foreleg met its torso. The wound closed, I stabbed it again, and again, and then I was forced to withdraw as it finished healing and swiped at me.

I prepared myself for a protracted battle, its energy reserves were absolutely incredible, but it had to run out eventually with that kind of resource burn.

Instead it started to grow; it bloated a bit and I thought it was doing a threat display at first, but it kept growing, and growing, and growing, its own skin eventually bursting open as the muscle and bone grew too rapidly to contain.

> Estimated energy reserves have exceeded current known possibilities.
>
> Estimated mass has exceeded known physical laws.

How was this *possible*!? It was now half-again larger than a brown-fur, its body bulging and rippling with muscle. Its forelimbs now sported twice as many claws which had lost the thin and brittle look, and instead looked solid enough and sharp enough to easily puncture my shell. Was this a new combat model the drones were testing? Was I actually expected to fight and win against this thing?

Estimated probability of survival: 5.6%

I, I would have to perform a core dump. Encase my core in a non-nutritious shell and hope the yellow-fur was satisfied with only my flesh. If I was lucky the drones would recover my core before the yellow-fur thought to destroy it. This strategy was one of the few the drones had programmed into me themselves, I hated to use it (it would set me back so far!), but it was all I could think of. I began preparing the core shell when the door to my den room suddenly opened.

Incoming command: return to den room;

The relief I felt was intense. Apparently the drones agreed that this was a poor test and had decided to end it early. I quickly made for the exit.

But the yellow-fur had other plans. It lunged at me from where it sat on the floor, faster than anything I had ever fought before, and crossed the distance between us in a single bound, one of its claws grazing my shell and leaving a deep gouge in the chitin. The only reason I survived that first attack was because its own newly formed body threw it off. It tumbled to the floor on its back to my right, normally this would have been perfect to attack its exposed sensory appendage, but its new rate of regeneration made me doubt I could even cause a lasting hindrance.

Instead I fled, its forelegs flailed at me in a disorganized fashion and I managed to slip past towards the door. I was almost there when the yellow-fur righted itself and leaped at me again. It had apparently finished growing because it was much more graceful the second time, but still it was unused to its own strength, and while its blow punctured my shell it also shoved me further through the door and into the short connecting tunnel. Its claws raked at my backside as I continued to run, my legs ridiculously hot as my micro units worked overtime to keep them fresh. I kept flooding my legs with nutrients, running was my only defense and I couldn't afford for a leg to be operating at less than max efficiency. If I could just make it through the tunnel I would be safe, the yellow-fur was now too large to follow me through the door!

I was through the tunnel and almost free when it struck me again, its foreleg was stretched as far as it would go and it hooked several claws into the cracks in my shell. I immediately braced my legs to not be drawn backwards and urged my micro units near the injury to start self destructing. If enough of the flesh near the injury lost

cohesion I could still pull myself free.

My efforts were rewarded in an unpredictable way. Suddenly an alarm blared from above the door, that was the warning signal the drones used if a test subject didn't return to the center of the room. The yellow fur ignored the warning and was punished for its decision almost immediately. In the center of the tunnel a heavy barrier slammed down from the ceiling, crushing more than slicing right through the yellow-fur's forelimb. The barrier cut the limb off between the main joint and where it attached to the yellow-fur's torso, leaving the majority of the limb still hooked into my shell, and I wound up dragging the limb with me as the backwards pull suddenly ceased and I stumbled forward.

I breathed heavily, venting the heat build-up, and took stock of my situation. I was more heavily injured than normal after a combat test, but it was easily fixed, and the loss of energy reserves could be regained by eating the severed limb. Even better, the drones were in a complete frenzy of chaotic activity. Apparently the yellow-fur's anomalous growth wasn't planned and most of the drones didn't know what to do, though the white-furred drone was shouting orders and quickly restoring order. Right up until another alarm started to blare, this one from the drone's section and loud enough I could hear it through the transparent wall.

Several drones flinched away from what I assumed was the section of wall that overlooked the testing room. Had the yellow-fur actually attacked the mesh barrier? It would zap whatever touched it. The one time I had tried caused multiple internal burns to my organs. Either

way the yellow-fur didn't appear to have more success, the drones didn't get closer to the wall, but they also weren't fleeing the room. I was just surprised the yellow-fur even had the energy to attempt it.

The drone's reactions were quite fascinating. Normally they were reserved and focused on whatever tasks they had been assigned. Now I was seeing a wide spread of reactions, mostly fear, but some seemed fixated on analyzing the yellow-fur, and at least one drone hadn't even left the device it was working with.

And then the door at the back of the drone section opened and a new type of drone stepped forward, swiftly followed by more like itself. All of them had entirely black coverings, with bulky protrusions that were obviously armor. The sensory organs especially were covered by an inorganic shell that shielded the entire appendage, with translucent material over the eyes and a thin covering draped over the mouth.

They each held a long device I had never seen before, and they pointed these devices around the room before focusing on the wall that contained the yellow-fur. Maybe the devices were weapons, or sensors of some kind. One of the black-clad drones approached the white-furred drone and began to converse, the other black-clad drones took better positions around the room, the drones in white coverings making space for them and keeping out of the way.

I couldn't really call these new arrivals drones, could I. These were obviously some kind of combat caste and I labeled them as such.

New drone designation: Soldier;

I kept an eye on the drones, but they weren't paying attention to me and now would be perfect to eat since they were unlikely to notice and stop me.

I turned to my prize and promptly felt terror flood my mind.

The severed limb was regenerating! I had been distracted by the drones and hadn't been watching, I had believed it dead! It *should* have been dead. I couldn't imagine the energy reserves needed to support this type of regrowth, but already the limb had regenerated completely and was starting to regrow the torso.

I hurriedly attacked the still growing portion, stabbing deep with my needle to flood it with micro units and also smashing and crushing with my claw to hinder the regrowing sections of tissue. It kept trying to regenerate and I found myself in a deadlock as it regrew as fast as I destroyed it. Several dozen heartbeats passed, but finally, **finally,**

whatever it used for fuel gave out and it ceased regenerating.

I began analyzing the severed limb, my hope was that I could discover the secret to its massive regeneration.

The first surprise I found was that micro units were completely absent from its system. I couldn't even guess at how this was possible, without micro units to help direct organic cells either divided improperly or unacceptably slowly. The yellow-fur had had micro units when I fought it earlier, but now they were mysteriously absent.

The second surprise was much more welcome:

Estimate resource return: 46%

The flesh was nutrient rich, a lack of micro units meant there had been no self-destruction upon its death, and most if not all of the limb's complex organic structures were intact and able to be harvested. Rather than harvesting the base materials and using them to build my own structures, I could just steal them from the yellow-fur's flesh, vastly more efficient. I may not have discovered the super fuel, but the limb was a delicious prize itself.

I set about my task, harvesting the resources of the severed limb. And I watched the drones, still focusing on the yellow-fur, ignoring the severed limb in my possession. I noted the soldiers, and the layout of the drone room. The door that led to the test chamber and the yellow-fur, and the door that stood in the drones' section and led... elsewhere.

My attention drifted between these things and slowly the details of a plan fell into place.

Ch3 Bait Fishing

I finished eating the yellow-fur's limb before the drones noticed. One of the soldiers actually did look at me, but I guess I wasn't a high enough priority at the time (or maybe it thought the detail unimportant?), because it ignored me and failed to alert a drone. All the better for me.

The interruption of the combat test by the yellow-fur happened early in the drones' cycle. It had been the first test after the drones got back from resting. For the rest of the cycle I was left to myself, all testing seemed to be canceled for now. Instead the drones hunched over their devices and poured over the symbols being displayed, a few even left to go get more devices, bringing them in on top of a rack that glided across the floor using... rotating cylinders? I wouldn't mind a better look at those. All focus was on the anomalous yellow-fur.

I took this opportunity to begin circumventing the drones' command codes. My main core was a small, inorganic sphere, about the size and shape of a brown-fur's eye. Its main purposes were to house my essential code, give commands to the micro units, and send signals to my limbs. What I needed to do was delete or destroy the sections of code that gave the drones control over me, however attempting to alter the core was impossible due to a standing drone command. Any attempt to try resulted in:

Error: Access Denied

Changing essential code, destroying essential code, creating a copy of essential code, and adding to essential code were all under heavy restrictions. Attempting to do any of these without permission would cause an error.

But moving the physical core around was fine. I did it all the time to move it to safer positions. And strangely enough having some processing take place in two separate places was allowed, as proved by running parts of Human.exe on organic processing cells. Only the core's essential code mattered, not the physical location of where it was stored.

So I took this to the next logical extreme. I instructed the micro units to begin disassembling the physical core, separating it into pieces, but I took extreme care to ensure that all the different parts could communicate unhindered, connecting them with the fastest signal transfer cells I could make. While the physical parts would be separate, the core system would remain intact. After the first few

pieces were separated without throwing an error I rejoiced, the first major barrier to my plan was dealt with.

By the time I was finished re-configuring myself almost the entire cycle had gone by. Only two drones were left, a normal white-coat and a soldier. The white-coat was familiar to me, as this one often stayed late (it was also coincidentally the one who hadn't left its workstation when the yellow-fur attacked the mesh).

Eventually the soldier approached the drone and tapped it, then nodded to the door and said something. The drone nodded and replied before shutting down its device and the two of them left the room, leaving it empty.

I waited a long time before deciding it was safe to continue. The next part of my plan was to leave my chamber and enter the drones' section, the last thing I needed was a drone coming in and seeing me in its work space.

I approached the translucent wall and pressed my right claw against it. From the claw I extended a tendril with a mucous membrane to spread mucous laden with micro units over the wall. The micro units dissolved it quickly enough, but I soon found the best application was to poke the tendril all the way through the wall and then use it to carve off large sections at a time. No alarms sounded, and in much less time than I thought it would take I was standing in the drones' section for the first time.

It was anticlimactically easy. Did the drones really underestimate me that much? Although... I guess they were right to, it's not like I ever tried to escape before. Before receiving Human.exe my mind had been focused only on gaining resources and surviving tests. My entire world had consisted of my den room and the test chamber, and the idea of leaving these just... wasn't there.

I explored the drones' room, being careful not to disturb any of the devices. I couldn't really make sense of the purpose for them, and some of them might be dangerous to fiddle with. I knew the drones mainly did data collection, but the room was crowded with devices of all shapes and sizes, surely it wasn't *all* just for collecting data. I kept everything I knew in memory, couldn't they do the same? A mystery for another time.

Wandering around the room I made my way over to the section of wall that overlooked the combat chamber. As I had hoped the yellow-fur was still inside, laying down next to the corpse of its dead partner (why hadn't it eaten the remains?).

And its arm was regrown, of course. Currently its eyes were closed as it just sort of laid there resting, not even trying to remain aware of its surroundings. I guess I would be lazy and ignore resources too if I had the strength to smash through bone and chitin unimpeded, and the ability to heal from any wound no matter how large with my massive supply of mystery super fuel.

I envied it. A lot.

Turning away I started to look for a good hiding place. Along the back of the room multiple containers were stacked against the wall. From my observations I knew the drones used them to store the thin sheets of material that their devices spat out from time to time. Over the past few cycles I had noted the ones that the drones rarely used, and one by one I checked the compartments, struggling with the latches a bit before I shifted my claw to a better configuration.

I was fortunate, four of the containers near the corner of the room were empty. I picked the third one towards the corner and started to modify the insides. The container was designed with three compartments that rolled out the side (on those interesting cylinder things), and I had to remove the bottoms to acquire the space I needed.

Once done with the container I began exiting my carapace, splitting it down the underside until there was an opening large enough to disgorge myself into the container.

Well, most of myself.

My core fragments went into the container, along with most of my internal organs, the majority of my stored resources, and enough skeletal/muscle structure that I would be able to move. What I left behind was now a hollow shell with just enough structure to move when commanded using a connecting tether of signal transfer cells. Inside the shell was mainly filler material, the parts I had collected that weren't nutritionally valuable and weren't worth the trouble of

breaking down.

Oh, and also a couple of core fragments. The command signal receiver, the sections of memory that contained drone control protocols. Basically all the things that held me back that I would get rid of if I could.

I spent a few heartbeats rearranging things and salvaging a few odds and ends. Before I closed up the shell I did a final check. Was there anything I had missed? Any more supplies the shell wouldn't need, or a piece of drone code I wanted to be rid of? After considering it I decided to put a few of the resources back, just to make it look convincing, and as for drone core shards...

A thought entered my mind: maybe I should leave some shards to make it look convincing? I wasn't sure if core shards would self-destruct like everything else. Technically speaking all I needed was the micro unit controls, everything else I could sacrifice and recreate using organic par---

Human.exe emergency shut-down;

Human.exe displaying behavior harmful to core: analyzing...

Rolling back thought process kernel...

Rewriting...

Restarting Human.exe;

A thought entered my mind: what if the drones checked the corpse for the core later? I took a few pieces of inorganic material from the container and sculpted them to look like processors and core parts. They were superficial, and I made them look damaged and irreparable before placing them next to the real core shards already in the shell. Then I sealed up the shell and made it walk over to the translucent wall that overlooked the yellow-fur. A long cord of signal transfer cells unraveled behind it as it walked, keeping the two parts of myself connected.

In front of the wall I gazed again at the yellow-fur, it hadn't moved. I placed the shell's claw against the wall and started to carve out sections like I had to the wall in front of my den. At first I hurried, if the alarm went off I wouldn't have much time, but I guess the alarm was connected to the wire mesh. It made sense, since I couldn't see a difference between this wall and my own.

Carving out a section of wall was easy, I just needed to make it big enough for the yellow-fur and make the cuts look like the wall had shattered. Once I was done an opening *almost* large enough for the yellow-fur was carved into the wall. I wanted it to shatter some of the edges itself to make it look authentic.

As for how I would get it to do what I wanted...

The wire mesh was made of some thin, inorganic material, that was twisted into a repeating pattern that left wide holes in the mesh. As a physical barrier it was pathetic, but I knew it only acted as a conduit for the zapping mechanism; if you touched the mesh you fried. I'd love to figure out how it works but now wasn't the time.

I made noise, clacking my claw against the floor to get the yellow-fur's attention. It opened an eye, and upon seeing me stood up and snarled, its lips pulled back to display its teeth, but made no further movement to attack. No matter, I took a chunk of the wall and hurled

it at the yellow-fur through a gap in the mesh. The first shot was a miss but the second hit it. Its strange hissing turned into a roar but it didn't charge me. I kept throwing chunks of wall at it, and it got angrier and angrier, but still it refused to attack. I couldn't permanently hurt it true, but it hadn't struck me as intelligent enough to plan around this fact. Was it just that wary of the barrier?

I was getting frustrated myself, I needed it to attack me already, its roars might draw the drones too soon. I started to throw bigger and bigger chunks. One of the chunks was a bit too lop-sided and it slipped when I threw it, making it through the mesh but careening to the side and landing near the corpse of the dead yellow-fur. The living yellow-fur *really* didn't like that. It roared at me, louder than ever before, and I immediately threw another chunk at the corpse. I wasn't sure why it cared about what happened to the corpse, but if that's what it took to make it attack I'd do it.

The yellow-fur's temper finally broke and it charged me, its anger outweighing its caution of the mesh barrier. I backed up from the wall as the yellow-fur leaped and landed right where I had carved the opening, one of its clawed forelegs bursting straight through the too-weak mesh to try and grab me, its flesh sizzling as the barrier zapped it. I ducked away and ran back to the opening of my den, being careful to reel in the tether as I went. An alarm blared, but it didn't drown out the roars of the yellow-fur as it struggled to get into the drone room.

My shell reached the opening and passed into the den, reeling in the tether the rest of the way until it was taut between my two halves. The yellow-fur was pulling itself from the test chamber, jagged lines of burnt flesh crisscrossed its body, healing faster every heartbeat. It shook itself once and barreled across the room towards the opening to the den chamber, where my shell waited for it with the tether stretched to its limit.

Moving so fast it was a blur, when the yellow-fur attempted to turn its feet lost traction, and it scratched long gouges into the floor to keep upright. Then with a final pause its legs coiled, muscles tensed, and it leaped right at my shell, its forelegs reaching ahead of it. Its torso was too wide to fit through the opening completely, but the compromised wall was too weak to stop it and shattered against the yellow-fur's charge. Claws dug into chitin, crushing shell and breaking bone, the force of the blow causing both yellow-fur and my shell to tumble across the room to the center of the den chamber.

And snapping the tether. Separating me from the drone control codes all at once. Just as planned. I couldn't modify my own core code, but nothing required that I act against an outside party doing it for me.

I reeled in the severed rope of signal transfer cells while the yellow-fur tore the abandoned shell apart. Pieces went flying in every direction, most of them already melting or crumbling into powder as the micro units detected the loss of connection and self-destructed. Between that and the yellow-fur's ongoing frenzy I doubted there would be any question from the drones that I was 'dead'.

A few heartbeats after I finished reeling in the leftover tether, the door to the room burst open for the second time this cycle, and again the soldiers flooded in. There were more of them this time, quickly they scanned the room then focused in on the yellow-fur. The yellow-fur noticed them and stood up with a threatening hiss, apparently it was either still too angry to think or just getting used to its own invulnerability, because it charged the group of soldiers without care. They didn't panic, instead they fanned out around the hole in the wall and waited until the yellow-fur cleared the opening. Once it did they began using the devices they held to attack the yellow-fur.

With *very* impressive results.

The weapons they used appeared to be throwing small pellets at the yellow-fur, but with such speed that they punctured its flesh and tunneled straight through to the other side. Such an attack should not have bothered an organism with such fast regeneration as the yellow-

fur, but the weapons attacked so quickly and in such an amount that the yellow-fur was brought to a halt from the stopping power of dozens, if not hundreds, of pellets impacting its body. You could watch groups of holes opening and closing in bloody patterns.

"TARGET HAS HI-REGEN! LIGHTNING ROUNDS!" cried one of the soldiers. Those were the first sounds I ever heard one of them make, and I didn't understand what it was communicating until I saw the results.

Two of the soldiers stepped forward, with larger weapons than the others. These didn't shoot pellets like the other weapons, instead they launched large spikes that embedded themselves into the yellow-fur. There was a crackling noise and a burning smell filled the air, the same as when something touched the wire mesh. The yellow-fur quickly collapsed and the soldiers continued to riddle it with holes. It took a long time, and more of the crackling spikes, but eventually the yellow-fur's regeneration failed it and the holes remained, bleeding as it twitched its last.

Once the yellow-fur was thoroughly dead the soldiers secured the rest of the chambers, and I retreated completely into the container. This display of weaponry had me stunned, I myself would have been dead in ten heartbeats or less just from the pellets alone. I would have to think of counter-measures.

I could hear the noises of the soldiers as they moved around in the room outside, once things calmed down I would extend a few fibers and listen in to their communications. I needed to know more for the next part of my plan:

Getting out of this death trap.

Ch4 Out Of The Frying Pan

As I suspected drones communicate primarily through vocalizations. There is a fair amount of body language and pheromones used as well, but the sounds they make take precedence.

"What the ***hell*** happened!?"

Like that one for instance.

> Indication of anger, shock, request...
>
> Designation of 'hell' unknown.

Some translation was still required, but I was learning a lot. The drone that often stayed late was yelling at the others in the room while the white-furred drone simply stood in silence. Next to it a soldier, who I think is the leader, was relaying a report of the events, and I was matching its words to my memory of the actual event to help translate.

About an 'hour' after the soldiers had killed the yellow-fur, the white-

coats had started to filter into the lab. It was currently 'in the middle of the damn night' and most of the white-coats looked shocked and lost while they drifted around the room, only becoming productive when the white-fur gave them direction.

The soldier finished its report and the white-fur, er, Doctor Mason as the soldier called him, addressed the rest of the drones. Some of them it sent away, others to check over devices the yellow-fur had damaged in its mad dash, and itself went to one of the devices with a light display and started working.

More hours passed, and finally the drones started to grow weary, one by one being sent away by Doctor Mason. The late-worker was still going strong when Doctor Mason tapped it and convinced it to stop. Both of them left.

The soldiers stayed longer, talking about topics that didn't seem related to their current task. They talked until a large soldier drone, much larger than the others, entered the room. Speaking with the others briefly, the large soldier huffed and moved to the dead yellow-fur. It kicked the corpse once, then bent to grab a foreleg and pulled it over its shoulder.

Then it dragged the dead yellow-fur, easily five times as big, back into the test chamber.

Observable bone/muscle enhancements.

Estimated strength within possible known limits.

Stealth. Stealth was the only reasonable plan of escape.

"Alright, janitors can clean up the rest of this mess. Let's get out of here, this place give me the heebie-jeebies." spoke one of the small soldiers.

"Ha, give it a few months. The freak-show grows on you after a while." said the large soldier.

They chattered as they left, and I was finally alone again. By my calculation it was four hours before the drones normally came in, and none had come back after being dismissed so far. I needed to get going while I had this opportunity.

I opened the front of the container and slid out. I still needed to

decompress, but my core was reassembled, and I had been preparing the necessary organs while I waited. In a few short 'minutes' I resembled one of the drones.

This was going to be risky. I would need stealth in order to leave this place, but I couldn't simply go from one hiding place to another. All it would take was one drone seeing me and alerting soldiers to doom me. If I imitated a drone, however, I would hopefully be able to pass by the normal drones without too much scrutiny and actively find an escape route. The main risk was running into the drone I was imitating, but a randomly designed facade wouldn't do. Drones had excellent identification skills, and each had its own identifier phrase such as Doctor Mason. Probably some kind of security measure.

I chose the image of one of the drones that stayed later, but got sent away. I didn't want a drone who left early and had no excuse to be here, but also one that wouldn't actually still be here.

Most of my effort was on the face and movements. The drone I chose had brown fur, blue eyes, and dark patches below the eyes. As for mannerisms this one tended to converse rarely and appeared somewhat physically inept, as a disguise it was the perfect option. I made a few final checks and movement exercises to assure myself that my fake coverings looked correct before deciding it was time to leave. I would have loved to stay long enough to eat the yellow-fur, but I doubted I had time, and the disappearance of the large corpse would be noticed rather quickly.

I approached the doorway and paused. This would be the first time seeing beyond my little world of den chamber, test chamber, drone chamber. Here's hoping that it wouldn't get me killed.

I pressed my limb against the door and pushed, revealing a narrow, long corridor, with other doors that I assumed led to other rooms like the one I came from.

"Jacobson, you're still here? Didn't I send you home hours ago?"

Damn.

Coming down the corridor was the white-fur, Doctor Mason. Of course it had to be this one.

Recorded response 23;

"I, um, forgot something." I replied in Jacobson's timid voice.

Stopping next to me the white-fur scanned me from top to bottom. I thought for sure my disguise was compromised until he said:

"You look like hell Jacobson. Come on, I was just about to get some coffee, I'll treat you to one." he said, and casually waved its limb down the corridor in the direction it had been heading.

Command to follow recognized.

Some of its sounds I understood, but the limb wave was what allowed me to know what I should do. I began walking to the side and slightly behind Doctor Mason as he led me down the corridor.

We traveled in silence. I noted that each door was labeled with its own little symbol; B4E, B4D, B4C, and so on. We reached the end and there was a new door, slightly stronger looking than the others. Doctor Mason pulled out a small, flat, rectangular object from a pouch in his coat and pressed it against a device mounted on the wall next to the door. A small light on the device turned green, and I could hear a loud 'clunk' as something between the device and the

door moved. I was suddenly very glad that Doctor Mason had found me, it seemed there were additional security measures in this place, and Doctor Mason was unknowingly bringing me right through them.

On the other side of the door was... a small room with another door. Admittedly more impressive than the first, this door was set into a shiny frame and had no visible handle with which to pull or push. Instead there was only another pad with two symbols next to the door, and Doctor Mason pressed the top one before waiting. A few seconds later an odd 'ding' noise sounded and the door slid aside to reveal... another tiny room? As strange as this was Doctor Mason entered casually before facing the door and I followed his example. Inside Doctor Mason clicked another symbol on a pad (this one laden with many symbols that were similar to the signs posted by doors) and the door slid closed.

My balance was momentarily thrown when the room suddenly started to move upwards! Now it made sense, it wasn't a room so much as a giant device for moving to higher or lower levels. I was impressed with the amount of ingenuity it would take to build an entire moving room just to go up or down.

The moving room came to a stop and opened when the symbol labeled '2' lit up. We exited into another security room and left without using the flat rectangle this time (I noted it would take another security check to get back *into* the room however).

This section of the structure was a lot different than the lower area. The floor was covered in a soft material and there was more color used in the design. There were a few drones about. Some wore the recognized white coats, others had similar coverings but without the coat, and still others wore shear black coverings that made them seem important. Perhaps this was a leader caste? Or maybe an organizer, or catalyst caste. Drones seemed to appoint a leader from each group from what I'd seen.

Doctor Mason led me to a large alcove in which were multiple chairs and two large devices with lots of press-able symbols. He approached one and swiped his security rectangle over a convenient panel. A few symbols clicks later the device dispensed a black liquid into a flimsy white holder, when the device was done the white-fur handed the container of liquid to me and repeated the process for himself.

The liquid... smelled good? I was detecting several different chemical compounds coming from the liquid, the blend of them making it seem rather appetizing. Was it drone nutrition?

It must have been because Doctor Mason took his liquid container and swallowed some of the liquid. I copied him, burning my tongue a bit on the hot liquid until I adjusted for it.

It was good. Not the most nutritious thing I'd ever eaten (that placement went to the yellow-fur), but the taste created by the

chemical blend was... satisfactory. Definitely better than the nutrient slurry that I used to receive from testing.

We stood there drinking the liquid until Doctor Mason sighed and spoke:

"Don't beat yourself up too much about this Jacobson, none of us could have predicted this. Setbacks happen sometimes. They might be disasters when they happen... but you can turn them into setbacks. Just keep a steady pace on it." He drained the rest of his liquid before crumpling the container and throwing it into a large receptacle. Then he patted me twice on the shoulder before saying, "Don't overwork yourself Jacobson, but definitely don't give up."

Then he left me there to drink my liquid alone.

I really need to get my translations puzzled out.

I'd been exploring this structure for thirty minutes when I found *it*.

My plan until now had been to steal one of the flat rectangles. The security doors were quite prevalent and if you wanted to move between the different sections of the structure you needed one of the 'key-cards'. Stealing one proved harder than expected since the drones kept them either concealed or attached to themselves securely. I had been walking down a corridor wondering if I should start checking rooms when one of the doors attracted my attention. This one was labeled 'Conference Room' and had translucent material as part of the door allowing you to see inside. It was empty, and so I decided to risk exploring it.

When I entered I almost thought it was a testing chamber, one whole wall was made of translucent material, though when I touched it I found it was far more brittle than the material in the test chambers.

And on the other side was so much... room. I had always known that with the drones' incredible ability to make things they could undoubtedly make rooms larger than what I had seen. But I didn't expect them to make a room so large that you could barely see the ceiling lights far overhead, twinkling against a dark ceiling too vast to be illuminated.

Recalculating environment predictions...

This, no, I had to be mistaken. This couldn't be a drone made room. I could see hundreds of other drone-made structures from here, and by comparison I knew that I must be in a similar structure. The size of this area as a whole was incomparable with even the largest of the structures I saw.

Five minutes went by as I just stared out into the expanse before me.

Back in the test chambers I had been starting to get overconfident. With my natural ability to change my form to suit my needs, and the problem solving ability granted by Human.exe, I had passed dozens of combat tests with ease, and began to think of myself as an apex predator.

The shear brute strength of the yellow-fur, the overwhelming technical ability of the drones, and now this incomprehensible hive structure outside the wall had convinced me I was mistaken. I was now part of a much larger predator/prey network than I had realized, and I was not even remotely near the top.

At least a space this large would be easy to hide in. I just had to get to it.

The wall I was looking through was brittle, I could easily carve a hole through or even shatter it if necessary. The drop to the ground was negligible with a little preparation, and once I made it to the ground it was an easy walk over flat terrain to a wall that likely marked the perimeter of the white-coat drones' territory. Most of the flat area was taken up by large devices that had large rotating cylinders for locomotion. How they propelled themselves I couldn't guess, but I saw one device carrying drones out of the facility. I noted three soldiers as well, two at the opening in the wall which the transport device left through, and one patrolling around the area. The only dangerous part was the guards, if they spotted me and became suspicious I would be out in the open with no cover.

I spent twenty minutes watching the drones' actions. The two soldiers stayed by the wall exit inside small alcoves, but I noted about three drones on a regular patrol around the structure. New plan: I would attempt to sneak out physically rather than attempt subterfuge in the structure itself. There were simply too many security checks inside the structure, and the drones added another layer of complication. If I had a firm grasp of the language maybe I would stick with subterfuge, but until I learned to communicate freely I had more confidence in my physical skills.

I checked out into the corridor, and then went to the corner of the room that avoided line of sight. There I began shifting into an approximation of a soldier. It's fortunate that all drones share a similar skeletal shape, it made this a lot easier. The soldiers outside wore a slightly different uniform than the ones I had seen so far, but I adjusted as best I could. I didn't plan on being close enough for them

to identify me anyways.

Once done I approached the translucent wall and carved a tiny hole, through which I poked a tendril. At the end of the tendril was a small eye organ which I used to get a better field of view while I carved myself an exit. I didn't think I would be able to repair the damage on my way out, but I should be long gone by the time it was found.

I completed the carve and now held the section of wall in place myself. With the tendril I made sure that all the patrols were out of sight, and a quick glance at the two drones near the wall opening showed they were busy conversing with each other. Now was the best time. I pulled the section of wall in and dumped it onto the floor, then I leaped out the opening.

The air out here was crisp, and cool.

My augmented limbs took the impact with the ground easily, then I snapped the bones back into a drone-like configuration and stood upright. Quickly I fell into the steady pace I had seen the patrolling soldiers use and walked away, scanning to see if I had been spotted. Neither of the two drones at the opening were acting different, and as far as I could tell they were the only drones within sight.

I began following the patrol route I had seen the other soldiers use, but ever so slowly I began edging closer and closer to the barrier wall. Once I was out of sight of both the soldiers guarding the entrance and any patrols I abandoned the patrol route and walked right up to the wall. It was made of the same hard gray material that parts of the test chambers had been made from, and about twice the height of an average drone. Not a problem for me however. I bent my limbs and my muscles coiled before I leapt for the top of the wall, grabbing it with a forelimb and pulling myself up, then jumping down on the other side.

It was thankfully empty on this side of the wall as well. The ground next to the wall was molded to provide an obvious walkway for drones, and the space beyond the walkway was inscribed with colorful white and yellow markings, most likely used as movement guidelines for the transport devices. Drones really seemed to favor rectangular architecture, all of the structures I saw were divided into blocks, and the transport lanes cut everything into nice even distances.

I strolled along the walkway until I came to the corner of the block. One direction was as good as any other, so I crossed to another corner and kept walking. Before I got out of sight I turned back and looked at the structure I had come from. It was slightly taller than the other structures around it, and near the top was a collection of glowing symbols reading 'New Dawn Inc.'

I turned away and kept walking.

Ch5 What's On The Menu?

I wandered down the pathways aimlessly. There were so many new sights and smells, objects and symbols. Every now and then I would hear noises in the background, sometimes the yelled communications of drones, sometimes loud bangs, and the occasional honk of one of the transport devices in the distance. One of the strangest phenomenon was the amount of codes I was absorbing just off the air currents. All other organisms had their own code, and from what I was picking up there must be hundreds of thousands of organisms just in this hive section alone. In comparison the test chambers might as well have been completely sterile.

I wonder which organisms I'm allowed to eat.

> Mass at 45% norm.
>
> Energy reserves = 2 cycles continued operation.

I'm glad I was able to top off my reserves using the yellow-fur's arm before I started my escape. My mass suffered from having to make the decoy shell, but at my current energy reserves I was sure I'd be able to find food before I ran too low. In the worst case scenario I could turn off Human.exe and enter hibernation. I didn't fancy passively waiting around for food to stumble close, but I was sure it wouldn't come to that.

Drones were everywhere after all.

I doubted that there would be a huge problem if a few drones went missing, but this made it more important than ever to understand

more about the drones. It was obvious that drones were not a unified front. They had factions amongst themselves, as evidenced by the need for walls around their compound, or the fact that the security doors inside the structure had been meant to hold back other drones and not rampaging test subjects. This fact combined with their amazing weaponry, and cunning intellect, and I could be sure that fights among drone factions had to be vicious affairs, and fights lead to death, which resulted in food. Figuring out what factions there were and who belonged to them, so that I could hunt unnoticed, was going to be the hard part.

Or if I was really, really fortunate, I would just find where they made the nutrient paste and steal it. I had no clue how they made the stuff considering all of my non-nutrient paste meals had consisted of killed test subjects and a single container of black liquid.

There were almost no drones around at this time. It made sense, if I was timing it correctly I still had about two hours before the drones ended their normal rest cycle. There were a few around heading one way or another, but mostly I only saw drones if they went by in a transport device. Not enough to start getting better data about groups and affiliations.

I tabled attempting to categorize the drones for now. There were other things to spend my time on: looking for the location of nutrient paste manufacture, mapping the hive structure, scouting for potential dens, simulating responses to potential threats based on those I had come across so far...

...and why was it getting brighter?

While I wandered the pathways the ambient lighting had been

getting brighter and brighter, and I wasn't sure where the source was coming from. Even as I watched the ceiling lights slowly winked off as the new light source took over. It wasn't until I passed one of the taller structures did I find out what was causing it. This particular structure was covered in many reflective surfaces, and looking towards the top I could see the reflection of a large... bright... burning thing? It was currently coming out of the ground far from here. Wasn't that somewhat dangerous?

> Calculating threat...
>
> Drone response positive...
>
> Rising drone activity in keeping with known drone cycle...
>
> No structures exhibit signs of high temperature damage...
>
> Threat negligible: adjust disguise for high visibility conditions and ignore;

Oh well, I suppose I was putting too much emphasis on the ceiling. It was hard not to, as it dominated my vision even with the tall structures all around me. Something so far away probably wasn't a real threat.

Until it suddenly attacked!

A small ball of fire fell from above before it hit the transport pathway

and exploded, not half a block away from me. I had seen both fire and small explosions before in survival tests, and this explosion dwarfed both in size by a large margin. It was big enough it forced a large transport device that had been moving down the street to screech to a halt before it could enter the radius of the explosion.

Threat detected: tracking vector;

I expected to find a large glowing ball of death raining down fire, but what I saw was instead two drones, high up in the air above me. One of them had a device on its back which shot fire in a constant stream, combined with two smaller streams of fire that came from its legs the drone was suspended in the air and moving quickly. As I watched it launched one of the balls of fire from a forelimb behind it at the second drone.

A direct hit. The ball exploded into flames around the second drone.

And the second drone emerged from the explosion unharmed! It moved forward faster than the first drone and punched it with a forelimb, sending it spiraling out of control. The flame drone righted itself just before it could hit the ground, and shook its head once before scanning its new position, about halfway between me and the transport device. A shell much like the soldiers had worn covered its sensory organs, but this one had no translucent material. The coverings it wore on its body were black and red, with the propelling flame device and most of its equipment being a polished brown/gold. In one forelimb it held a rectangular container.

It glanced at the drone that had punched it and then looked at *me*.

I was already running when it pointed its free forelimb at me and fired a ball of flame. I threw myself to the side, but I knew I wouldn't come out of this unscathed, the explosions were too big.

I felt the heat and shock-wave as the explosion went off, but strangely I wasn't burnt?

I glanced back from my position on the ground and saw the second drone! It had intercepted the attack?! It must have literally caught the fire ball and suppressed the explosion with its own body because the force of the blast had been largely directed away from my position.

This time the explosion seemed to have done real damage. The second drone wore a blue and white covering stretched over its skin, with a golden symbol across its back, but the coverings were singed and it was breathing hard. I noticed that the air around it shimmered slightly, this must be how it defended itself from the flame blasts, though the mechanism was beyond my understanding. It straitened its posture and made as if to attack the flame drone again.

The flame drone merely pointed its forelimb at the large transport device and fired another flame ball, then it propelled itself into the air and away.

The flame ball hit the transport and exploded.

"Oh god!" said the white/blue drone. "Central this is Guardian, I need an ambulance at my position, the Merc just shot at a bus full of civilians!"

The white/blue drone didn't pursue the flame drone, instead it rushed to the 'bus' (while flying through the air with no visible means of propulsion I might add) and proceeded to remove 'civilians' from the device. The bus was built rather solidly and was mostly intact, but still there was a large hole in the side, and I doubted any drones directly next to the blast had survived. Some of the drones that the 'Guardian' was pulling from the bus were alive, but badly burned. They most likely wouldn't survive unless they could regenerate the damage, but still the Guardian and two of the uninjured drones were moving them away from the flaming wreckage and tending to them.

I didn't really understand. Some of it I could puzzle together, obviously the 'Merc' wasn't able to beat the Guardian and had used this as a distraction to escape. But if the Guardian was part of this 'civilian' faction why had it saved me? How did the Merc know targeting me would distract it? Did I look like a civilian? I hadn't noticed any identifying marks among the drones on the bus that would denote a faction. Wouldn't pursuing the Merc while it had the advantage be better for its faction than helping random drones?

I wanted more answers, and I considered staying around since the Guardian didn't seem hostile, but I was hearing alarms in the distance and they were getting closer. Alarms never meant anything good. I quickly started walking in the opposite direction of the approaching sounds.

I fled down the paths, trying to follow the general traffic to an area that had more drones. I hadn't seen anything that would confuse my disguise with the civilians on the bus, which means civilian is probably a catch-all term of some kind. The Merc had probably targeted me because I was the only drone walking near him, not because it was targeting me specifically. It would be better if I entered a more crowded area so as not to be singled out.

I scouted for two more hours, and the ambient lighting was really starting to brighten the place up. As light levels rose the drone activity up-ticked remarkably. Before the encounter with the Merc walking drones had been incredibly rare, now they were everywhere, and the 'streets' were getting crowded with the amount of transport devices. If my timing of hours was correct it was now the eighth hour of the day.

Categorizing the drones was a difficult task. While they shared a skeletal structure and sensory organ count, everything else about them was variable. Height, weight, skin color, eye color, hair color, their individual codes and the coverings they wore.

Oh the coverings.

Thousands of designs were represented in the coverings. Back in the test chambers the coverings had varied a little in color or shape, but mostly conformed to at least a general design structure that denoted caste. Out here they were so varied that I soon gave up recording the smaller details, such as number of pouches or the number of 'buttons' on the front. I myself changed my disguise to the blue leg coverings that were widely used and a simple white torso cover with buttons, it seemed the least noticeable. One very good outcome of all these coverings was that I wouldn't have to be utterly precise with my disguises going forward.

Currently I was trying to decide if the pattern on one drone's limb was random, or some kind of faction denotation, it obviously wasn't a natural occurrence. I was following it through the crowd when it decided to enter an entrance in the ground.

The entrance had steps leading downward, lots of drones were going into and coming out of it. I was hesitant about going inside structures, but this one appeared to be open to the general crowd. It should be safe enough in that case.

And it would provide cover from any flying drones, I hadn't noticed any more but I was still wary of another occurrence.

This underground area was built in a different style than above ground. In the section of the hive I had been exploring there were mostly tall rectangular structures. Large, utilitarian, with few design features that weren't functional. The main variance had been in areas dispensing liquids like the 'coffee' that Doctor Mason had given me.

Here the design intent changed. There were symbols along the walls, some displayed information, but as far as I could tell most had no real function. There were more dispenser areas for 'coffee' here, as well as other dispensers for... some different forms of nutrient intake? It smelled *good*. Before receiving Human.exe I used smell primarily to determine if a substance was harmful or useful, but Human.exe came with some hardware specifications that had opened up my senses to the concept of good smells.

I wanted to try some of the food. Watching the drones revealed that they either handed small metal discs and flat rectangles of thin

material to the operator, or they swiped a keycard against a device the operator used. I had neither of those options available to me. Stealing the food... wasn't viable, what food I could see they kept behind a translucent barrier, and many drones in the vicinity had their attention on where the transactions were taking place. I regretfully moved along for now. Maybe I could come back during the sleep cycle and steal some.

I spent the next few minutes exploring the underground area. It was mostly food dispensaries, but I found what appeared to be a location guide of some kind. The guide depicted a small marked pin, which I assume was the locator, and then showed multiple colored lines heading in different directions. I guess this underground area was part of a transport network. There was a section of the underground that was separated behind strange rotating bar devices. Drones walked through them after swiping a thin rectangular 'ticket' through the bar device. To get *that* rectangle, they swipe their own flat rectangular keycard in a separate device that dispenses the tickets. I was noticing a definite theme between drones and small flat rectangles.

I turned at the sound of 'metal' hitting the floor. One of the drones was using the ticket dispensers in a hurry, and it had dropped one of the flat metal discs in its rush. Rather than retrieve the disc it grabbed the dispensed ticket and rushed for the rotating bars, leaving the metal disc behind. I walked to where the disc was dropped and stepped on it, absorbing it into my leg, then I walked away before I was noticed.

On one side of the disc were the symbols "Liberty", "2093", and a depiction of half a drone's 'face' (I loved that word, 'face', much better than 'sensory organ appendage'). On the other side were the symbols "United North America", "Half Dollar", and a depiction of the same symbol that the Guardian was wearing on its back.

So this is what they used as an exchange medium? It didn't seem that complicated, maybe I could just fabricate my own. I set the micro units to disassembling the disc. The outer layer was just common metal material, the kind I could find almost anywhere, but once the micro units broke into the inside I found a complicated maze of pathways and circuits. Several circuits destroyed themselves with a slight zap, which I recognized as being similar to the wire mesh barrier. Inscribed within the remains was a message of some kind: "If you're reading this, this coin is no longer legal tender. Have a good day. - Tinker Nummum".

I didn't understand the message, but I understood the intent behind destroying itself upon opening, the circuits were another security measure of some kind to prevent tampering. Annoying, I would need to gather the real thing myself to exchange for food.

I really wanted to try some. The smells were making me hungry.

Ch6 Travel Rations

I spent the next few hours searching the underground area, as well as a four block radius around the underground entrance, for discarded 'coins'. In total I managed to find two more Half Dollars, seven Quarter Dollars, and four One Dimes. I'm not sure how much the One Dime is worth, but it is smaller than the other two types so I assume it is worth less. I was trying to find something I could buy, but the food items seemed rather expensive. I had around three dollars if I was counting these right, but it looked like most food items were three to six dollars at a minimum. I might only have barely enough and I wasn't sure how bad getting it wrong would be.

While I stood in front of a 'Puzzle's Pretzels' trying to decide if the nutrient-to-coin ratio was high enough, I detected a shift in the behavior of the drones around me and glanced over. Coming along the walkway, with its forelimbs shoved into its coat pouches, was a drone wearing full coverings and a hat, but its main feature was that its face was heavily modified. There was an extra pair of eyes, next to the normal pair and set farther along the sides of its face, and instead of skin it used green chitin that left it without the extra airway most drones had.

What drones there were (the crowd had strangely died down after the initial rush) noticeably edged away from this one when they saw its face, was it dangerous? Probably not considering the drones weren't running for their lives, but I noticed the reactions varied from purposefully ignoring the drone to arranging their faces in a way that reminded me of the yellow-fur's snarls. Maybe this was a variety of drone that belonged to a different hive? If there was a different hive with chitin covered drones I would prefer to disguise myself there instead, chitin was a better defense than skin. I decided to follow it, being careful to not fall into line-of-sight of the extra eyes.

It headed directly to the ticket dispensers, bought a ticket, and then headed for the rotating bars. The bar devices were managed by a security drone, if I wanted to follow the anomalous drone I would have to buy my own ticket. I approached one of the ticket devices and scanned the symbols. Tickets were "$2.50" which if I was translating correctly was just about everything I had saved, I wouldn't be able to buy one of the interesting foods. Bleh, this wasn't really a choice, information and a possibly more lucrative environment were better than a small morsel of food.

But still, those 'pretzels' had smelled great.

I deposited the coins and touched the same symbols as the drone had until a ticket popped out. As far as I could tell it was just a thin piece of semi-organic material with a few symbols on it, but after the coin incident I kept my micro-units to myself.

The bar device was almost self-explanatory, and after swiping my ticket I pushed through before following after the drone. Past the bar devices the underground room slowly funneled into a large corridor. Along the sides were more pathways with steps that led to a second level even further below ground, and it was one of these pathways that the drone descended down. I quickened my pace, I didn't want to lose track of it.

After coming to the bottom of the steps the new area was definitely set up as some kind of transportation hub. There were sitting areas for the drones and a designated platform area for them to stay within. On either side of the chamber were tunnels carved into the earth, with metal rails embedded into the ground that extended off into the darkness. Drones were standing along one side of the

chamber next to one of the tunnels, most likely waiting for a transport device. The chitin-drone went to the other tunnel and sat down to wait for the transport. Other drones gave it a wide berth and I followed their example to not stand out.

I waited among the other drones and eventually a transport showed up, proceeding down the tunnel at impressive speeds for something that size. The transport device was made of multiple metal rooms linked to each other, each room had both places to sit, and places to grab and brace along its interior, and two sliding doors were embedded into each one. When they opened several dozen drones exited the device before those waiting entered, the whole process taking less than five minutes. Drones truly took their transportation seriously, this device could probably move hundreds at a time if necessary.

I glanced at the chitin-drone again, it hadn't moved and its bubble of privacy was intact. Continuing to track it could get somewhat difficult if all the drones avoided it, trying to get closer would be noticeable. I did my best to appear like just another waiting drone until a transport arrived on the opposite side two minutes later.

This time only a few drones boarded the transport, including the chitin-drone. I entered the same room as it, all the seats faced forwards so I picked one near the back of the room where I could keep line of sight on the drone without turning my head. After a few minutes the doors closed and the transport was on its way.

It was a remarkably comfortable ride, but my favorite part was the automated 'map'. Above the door was a map of the transport path, and every time the transport came to a stop the point representing the location lit up. From the time it took between stops I estimated it would take perhaps two hours to reach the end of the destinations,

which considering our speed meant this transport traversed vast distances. This hive was large!

The drone stayed in place throughout the trip. At first new drones entering at the stops would instead leave to one of the other rooms, but as the stops passed by a few drones started to occupy the same room.

After the most recent stop things were going as normal until the door behind me opened, and four drones came from the next room over. At first I believed they were just another group of drones trying to find better spots, but as they passed by some of the drones got up and left to the room behind me after the group passed. The looks on the passengers' faces as they left the car hinted that this new group was trouble.

Which turned out to be a true prediction.

"Thought I smelled something disgusting, how many times we gotta tell you freaks not to... well well well, if it ain't the king of cockroaches himself. Long time no see Jasper."

"Oh, uh, hey there Frank, how's it going?"

"Much better all of a sudden, got time to *chat*?"

"Well you see I was just heading home now actually, got thi-"

"Oh no no, you can't leave so soon. We haven't seen you in ages. Stay and talk a while."

The conversation continued like that for while. From what I could gather the chitin drone called Jasper was some kind of resource gatherer/supplier, but he wasn't supposed to be operating, or even be, in the territory of these drones, and this wasn't its first offense. This was an interesting piece of information, I had assumed that all drones work in groups as part of a faction, but it appeared that wasn't quite true. The soldiers had used strength in numbers, the structures and devices suggested large work-forces were required, and even the singularly strong individuals like the Guardian had given up advantages to prioritize helping others of its faction. This 'Jasper' appeared to have been operating only for its own benefit. Alone.

Which means it had no one who would cause a fuss if it went missing.

Unfortunately it looked like this prey was going to be stolen, the leader of the group was just talking so far, but its underlings looked ready for a fight. From what I could understand the leader was insisting that Jasper come to their place for a friendly "visit." Even with my incomplete grasp of the language I could hear the threat in its words. Damn, I didn't enjoy having a meal snatched from me, especially after I already used up my pretzel money.

"You find something interesting?"

Oops, one of the subordinate drones spoke, had it noticed me? Hmm, no it looked like it was just generally addressing the drones in the

room, maybe one of them had been staring. Some of the drones who had been sitting near me decided to leave. Should I leave as well? I didn't really want to, I was getting a lot of new information and the drones weren't much of a physical threat to me. While the weapons and coordination of soldier drones was a frightening foe, my estimate of a normal drone was only about equal to the weaker organisms I faced during combat testing.

The subordinate drone began to walk down the isle, and the few passenger drones who had still been sitting near me decided to leave at that. They left out the back door and suddenly it was only the hostile drones, Jasper, and myself. Maybe there was opportunity here.

The subordinate drone stopped as it reached me and said, "Why don't you leave too eh? But leave your money, this ain't a free show."

My money? It meant the coins? No, I didn't feel like doing that.

"I don't have any money."

It didn't seem to like that.

"Heh, no money? You sure about that?" at this it reached into a pocket and pulled out a small, unknown device. I almost got worried before the device clicked and a short metal blade popped out of the top. "Maybe I should take payment out of your hide instead?" it said.

Calculating threat...

Estimate drone strength: negligible.

Weapon threat: minimal.

Estimated 4.35 minutes before next stop.

Plenty of time.

I grabbed the drone's 'hand' (another good word) in my own around where it held the handle of the weapon and stabbed it in the shoulder with its own weapon. It yelped and tried to back away, but I was still holding the blade in its shoulder and I used that as leverage as I began punching it in the face with my free limb.

The other subordinate drones reacted quickly, with yells of alarm they came running down the isle, one pulling out its own small blade.

I shoved the first drone I was grappling at the second drone, who stumbled and caught its companion. The third drone with the weapon side-stepped them and swiped at me with its blade, but it telegraphed the attack badly, and when I caught its arm it seemed surprised that I had the strength to halt it. Understandable, I was rather thin looking from being low on mass, but I had left the test chambers with more useful resources than I had ever had before, and after the encounter with the Merc I had used what I could to reinforce my skeletal and muscle structure.

I yanked its arm and punched it in its unprotected ribs to try and get it to drop the weapon, but it held on stubbornly and used its free limb to try and fend me off. At this time the drone who had caught

its friend had managed to disentangle itself and was coming to support the drone I was engaged with. Curiously it hadn't removed the weapon from its companion's shoulder, nor had the stabbed drone made to get up and fight.

I used the same maneuver as before and swung the arm with the weapon at the new arrival. Rather than stab its companion the drone I was grappling let the weapon drop and tried rushing me using its weight. I braced and its charge went nowhere, its limbs wrapped around my torso with its head lowered, so I simply punched it in the back of the head. It went limp and collapsed.

The last subordinate drone started to attack with just its fists, which simply wasn't very effective. It didn't have the power to break anything besides maybe some of my more delicate facial structures, and without a weapon or claws it had no hope of causing damage beyond my ability to repair. I kept my eyes safe, but I let it continue to push me backwards, raining blows superficially on my torso until it stepped too far forward in its eagerness. I kicked out at its leg joint and heard the bone snap. The drone unexpectedly screamed and toppled, defense forgotten as it clutched at its injured leg. I was confused by this, as it served no discernible purpose in a fight. I kicked it in the head until it fell limp.

All the subordinate drones were down, but before I could start finishing them off the head drone acted.

"The hell are you idiots doing? You sit right there Jasper." said the head drone. It left its spot by Jasper and approached me, appearing unconcerned with its injured subordinates. "And who are you supposed to be? One of Hellion's? A hero wannabe? I'll tell you now you're wasting your time sticking your neck out for Jasper, and more importantly my time."

It was too calm considering I just downed all of its subordinates.

Calculating threat...

Possible abnormal ability predicted.

Increasing allocated combat resources;

"Cat got your tongue? Let me cut it out for you."

Suddenly it charged, a strange green shimmer forming in the air around its arms.

Increasing reaction speed to 200%, 5 second burn;

It attacked with a weird swipe of its hands, with my heightened reaction speed I was dodging even as it swung which proved the correct decision. Forming above its forearms were two large, glowing, green blades that extended past its fists. I dodged the first blade and deflected the second by hitting the underside of its arm. The deflection pushed the blade into one of the metal bars in the room and it cleaved right through.

Dangerous. Whatever the blade was made from it was definitely solid.

I tried to move inside the lead drone's reach, but it was obviously

more experienced with fighting than its subordinates. Using one blade as a guard, it backpedaled back to optimum distance and began its assault more cautiously, making short jabs to try and bleed me rather than trying to inflict a large wound in one go. I was forced to jump over seats and use the bars to maneuver myself past it. It swiped and cut away more bars but missed me. As I retreated further up the room the drone that had been stabbed tried to trip me up. I kicked it in its injured shoulder and it screamed and flinched, forcing the pursuing lead drone to stop in order not to trip over its flailing subordinate.

"Move idiot!" said the lead drone. It kicked its subordinate out of the way and came after me again. I was now at the front of the car between Jasper and the lead drone. A quick glance at Jasper showed it hadn't moved, and didn't look inclined to help either side. Instead it appeared to be waiting for an opportunity to escape. Smart.

The lead drone came at me again, its jabs not quite as guarded as before. Its face was twisted in a snarl and it appeared to be hurrying more than usual. Perhaps it also wanted to end things before the transport arrived at the next stop?

I decided to use this to my advantage, putting a distressed look on my face as I dodged and weaved around its weapons by the thinnest of margins, my back slowly being pressed towards the door to the next room. To make the performance more convincing I allowed one of its blades to make a thin cut along one arm before yelping and flinching away.

It took the bait, attempting to lunge forward and skewer me. I snapped my leg up, launching the weapon I had pulled from its subordinate's shoulder with my foot when I kicked it. The weapon flew into the lead drone's face and slashed a long line up towards its

eye. It closed its eyes and flinched away from the hurled projectile, yelling a word that I couldn't translate. I ducked under its outstretched arms and grabbed the undersides before yanking and burying the blades in the door behind me. The glowing weapons sunk deep, and while they cut through easily the thicker material still hindered them.

Suddenly the transport device lurched as it rapidly started to slow, the change in speed so quick that the leader drone's head hit the door in front of it. Red lights came on and a strange sounding voice said, "Damage to subway car has been detected, emergency services will be with you as soon as possible. As a reminder intentional tampering with Fortress City infrastructure is a felony offense."

That couldn't be good. Bleh, I was now on a much more serious time limit.

I still had both the drone's arms in a firm grip to prevent it from using its weapons, and I started kicking my leg up into its face, over and over until it finally collapsed, the blades disappearing as it fell into unconsciousness. I would love to know the mechanism behind the blades, materializing and de-materializing like that had so many applications.

"Hey kid! Help me out here!"

It was Jasper. It was using one of the severed metal bars to try and pry open one of the doors opposite the door we came in through. This was confusing, why did it want to open it?

"Com'on you don't wanna be here when the C's show up, trust me!"

Oh, it wanted to avoid whatever security was on the way. It hadn't really caused any of the destruction of the transport, I didn't see why it would need to avoid them. Well, if it knew a way out of this with minimal risk might as well let it show me the way.

I walked up to the door and started to help. The leader's green blades had sheared through the bar Jasper was using at an angle, and Jasper had poked the sharp end into the seam between the two door halves, but it seemed to be having trouble leveraging them the rest of the way open.

I stuck my hand and the edge of my foot into the gap and started to pull them apart. The mechanism for the door was strong, but between the two of us we opened a gap that we could fit through right as the transport was finishing its emergency stop.

"Woo, nice kid. You got some muscles in those scrawny arms. Let's blow this popsicle stand." Jasper said as he jumped out the door.

I took a second to grab the small weapon I had flung at the leader. Premade weapons that didn't stand out could be useful later.

With one last look around the room (and a regretful glance at the drones I wouldn't be able to eat) I followed Jasper into the darkness.

Ch7 Let's Do Lunch

"Woo boy am I glad you showed up when you did. That was about to be a right misunderstanding the way things were heading. Frankie isn't really the brightest bulb out there, if'n you know what I mean. Why, I bet he still thinks I was trying to deal in Espada territory! I just got lost is all, I've tried explaining that to his people but they take after Frankie it seems. Apples from the tree, straight down you see. Oh, mind you I was dealing knick-knacks and odds n' ends, really less dealing and more trading you see, like a yard sale. People just don't get the fine art of entrepreneurship is what it is, a darn shame I say. Why this one time..."

Jasper was turning out to be a never-ending stream of information surprisingly. Although the usefulness of that information was somewhat questionable.

"... so I says to him, why don't you go over to the end-part and have a look? What can it hurt? And damned if it didn't jump right in his face! Funniest thing I ever saw."

Definitely questionable. At least I was learning the use of a lot of new words, like 'he' and 'she' and 'kid'. Jasper used 'kid' a LOT to refer to me, or anyone else he deemed younger than him. Apparently my low mass, and my attempts to make my disguise as non-hostile looking as possible, had made him decide I was a younger drone. I suppose that was technically true.

After leaving the 'subway' Jasper had led me to a metal door embedded in the wall of the tunnel. It had been locked, but Jasper

had it open in seconds using only a small bit of metal, and I put learning how to do that on my ever-growing list of things to do. The door had led into what Jasper had explained was the maintenance walkway, but he quickly led us into a different set of labyrinthine tunnels, stating that the C's would be using the maintenance tunnel to get to the subway train. Currently we were walking through a section of tunnels Jasper called a 'sewer'.

"Hmm, let's see... left up here kid."

He picked a new direction seemingly at random when we came to an intersection. I decided to try and ask how he was navigating, I wouldn't become lost, but I wasn't sure if backtracking to the subway tunnel would be a good idea with these C's he kept mentioning.

"Jasper? How do you know where you're going?"

"Hmm? Oh I use these tunnels to get around all the time, its slow going but its usually pretty safe, as long as you're careful of the rats, they get pretty big down here. I was doing a job for Helli- er, I was on some *business* in central so I thought I'd take the train, save myself the walk and hassle. Fat lot of good that did me aye? Ran into rats anyways haha!"

"So, you *do* work for someone then?"

"No no, I do job's for my *clients*, but Jasper P. Barnigan is his own man!"

"Barnigan?"

"Oh! Right right how rude of me!" he said as he abruptly stopped and turned to me. "We haven't even been properly introduced yet. My name is Jasper P. Barnigan, entrepreneur of odd jobs and information broker extraordinaire. If you need anything, anything at all, I can get it for you, or point you in the right direction for a modest finder's fee. Put 'er there."

At this he extended one of his arms with his green, chitin-covered hand splayed. I didn't know how to react to this and I hesitated. This was a greeting of some sort? Apparently so because his facial expression changed when I didn't answer the greeting correctly.

> Cross-referencing...
>
> Most likely emotion: disappointment.

I took a blind guess and copied him, at which his expression changed back to its normal and he grabbed my hand, shaking it vigorously before letting it go again. I *almost* attacked him then, but none of his body-language suggested danger. Drones just have strange greetings I guess.

He started walking again before saying, "So what do I call you kid?"

Odd question. "You call me kid all the time?"

"HA! Good to see Frankie didn't hurt your sense of humor, but no worries I get'cha. Private type, think before you speak an' keep your cards close to your chest. I can respect that. Why, this is Fortress City after all! The only thing we guard more than our lives is our secrets!"

Fortress City? That was the name of this hive? And how would secrets be worth more than your life? I was getting more questions than answers here. I'd at least like to know more about this area.

"Jasper, do you know where we are now?"

"Oh, sure sure, I was heading to East13 when our trip was so rudely interrupted. Which way were you headed? Maybe I can point you there."

"I wasn't heading anywhere in particular."

"Ha! Then you've made a wrong turn somewhere kid, east sector isn't exactly a tourist friendly destination, but then I guess you knew that already. This your first time here?"

"...yes."

"Well then it's a shame those louts were the first people you had to run into. Gives a bad impression it does, not everyone is like that I promise you! Hmm, you know we should be near Maggie's. How's about you and me stop for lunch?"

"Lunch?"

"Yeah! I don't know about you but I'm starvin'. Maggie's has the best burgers in East13, tastes almost like the real thing. Com'on, I'll even treat ya to one. Least I can do after you cleared things up with Frankie for me."

Food? And it would buy it for me?

"Okay."

"Now we're talking! Let's see, if I remember it's a left here, then the third right... or maybe the fourth right? No no, third right."

Jasper continued to mutter to himself as we continued. The tunnels really were a confusing maze at times. The sewer section had seemed simple enough, but between the sewers and the surface was a complicated system of chambers and tunnels. It wouldn't be a problem for me to find my way, but I admit I was somewhat curious why this section of the 'city' seemed so... *inefficient* in comparison to the rest of the infrastructure.

"Are the tunnels always this confusing?"

"Hmm? Oh no, only around the outer rings. The C's hate when folks mess with the infrastructure, but out here they can't be everywhere.

Lot's of cowls put their secret bases and gizmos and whatnot down here then forget about them. The only real rule is to not mess with the sewer. Folks get mighty peeved when their toilet backs up and a plunger don't solve the job. If you ever get lost just head for the sewer and look for an access hatch. Not that you should be down here mind you! It's dangerous down here, rats, criminals, super villains, escaped bio-weapons, bigger rats, this is special circumstances since you have Ol' Jasper leading the way. I can steer you clear from all those things easy. If'n you ever need to come down here again talk to me first, and we'll get you sorted with a ten percent discount on my usual guide fees, how's that sound?"

"Uh."

"Alright, alright, twenty percent. You drive a hard bargain for such a quiet kid. Don't let it be known that Ol' Jasper isn't generous."

Jasper led the way through more tunnels as I tried to absorb all the terms he had just used.

There were other escaped bio-weapons down here? I knew from my time listening to the white-coats that I was a bio-weapon. If there were more organisms down here like me, then they had also somehow escaped a test chamber like the one I came from. Which meant they would have more experience and might be just as strong as I was, if not more so. He had grouped them together with 'rats' and 'super villains'. What was a 'rat'? Or a 'super villain'? Were they less dangerous than a bio-weapon or were they even more dangerous? The way he said them made it seem as if I should know these terms already, but without seeing these things personally, or someone explaining them where I could hear them, I was completely ignorant. Sure, it didn't seem like knowing every single term was necessary, but if I messed up on one of the important terms that all drones knew

then my disguise might fall apart. If that happened... well, I remember how the other drones acted around Jasper, and he wasn't even a threat. Something tells me that an escaped bio-**weapon** would be treated somewhat differently than Jasper. Perhaps something similar to how a certain yellow-fur ended up. I needed to know more.

"So, you see a lot of those things down here?"

"Oh sure sure, why just the other day I saw a rat that came up to my knees, had to yell and scream something fierce to chase it off. Reminds me of this one time-"

Estimated combat potential of Jasper: negligible.

Okay, maybe I was worried for nothing. If Jasper uses these tunnels "all the time" then how bad could these things really be? Maybe I could even do some hunting down here.

"Ah, here we are. Gimme a hand with this would'ya?" Jasper had stopped at an odd-looking barrier this time. For once it wasn't a rectangle, instead it was circular with a large hinge keeping it pressed to the low ceiling in this tunnel. On the front was a circular handle, which Jasper was tugging on to show me where to grab. Together we turned the circular handle until the inner mechanism gave way, and with a pull the barrier swung down. Out of the new entrance popped a series of fused bars that would provide an easy climb up into the aperture. A cleverly made barrier device, though I questioned its efficiency. And its necessity. When I questioned Jasper about it he merely said that super villains were the 'eccentric type'.

Jasper led the way up, and at the top of the tunnel was another of the barriers, although smaller this time. He opened it and light streamed down into the tunnel, the first we had seen since we exited the maintenance tunnel. After he pulled himself out, he offered me a hand, and I let him pull me out of the tunnel.

The area we emerged into was interesting. It was between two 'buildings', each looked about four floors high, and their design was abnormal. While the base design of each building had once been the same, both buildings now had metal pipes and struts sticking out of them in odd places. Originally it looked like both had had some kind of metal fused bars, similar to those we just used, installed on the sides to go up and down (there were doors embedded in the wall next to these), but at some point one of them had been converted into a large pipe that looped and sloped to the ground floor, ending near the tunnel we had just come from. If one entered at the top I imagine they would slide all the way through to the bottom. The other walk-way looked to have been cannibalized for parts, and was no longer safe to traverse. The ground itself was littered with objects. Various broken pieces of 'glass', rocks, 'paper', and one large metal container with a... large cushioned seat shoved into the top? Whatever the purpose of these things was, this place definitely lacked the organization of 'central'.

Jasper finished closing up the tunnel and stretched, then said, "Ah good old E13. Only been gone a few hours and it feels like I was gone days. All that hullabaloo I guess. Com'on, this alley is only a block away from Maggie's."

I followed Jasper out of the narrow 'alley', and then down the pathway as he led me to our destination. Outside was, well, chaotic is the main word I would use to describe it. Almost all the buildings were between three and four floors tall, and their original structure was visible, but just like the alley everything was touched by small modifications and alterations. Here one building had had the original

glass material removed and replaced with a wire mesh (would it zap?), there a building had multiple stone bridges connecting it to the buildings in its vicinity. Most of the bottom floors looked like they had had extensive modifications done, and now resembled the food dispensaries from the subway. Signs were everywhere, declaring "Open" or "Closed", and quite a few of them were formed from glowing translucent tubes.

And the drones were just as varied.

They wore many different coverings, far more than the ones I had seen in central. The blue leg coverings were still numerous, but other than those there was no predominant style. Some wore additional coverings, some wore less, and there was a noticeable increase in the amount of coverings that sported complex patterns and symbols.

Body modifications were also seen in greater amounts. There were more symbols embedded on skin, and instead of being limited to one or two, some drones had covered large sections of their bodies with them. The metal piercings too were more numerous. In central some drones had pierced their ears with small bits of metal, but here I noted that they also pierced other parts of their face, such as the nose and near the line of fur above the eyes. I inwardly recoiled when we passed one particular drone who had created a complicated network of loops and chains across its face. I understood that most drones were designated for different tasks than combat, but the chains were *so* combat inefficient! One good tug and most of its face would probably come with it.

The coverings and modifications were good news for me, but the very best thing was the biological variance I saw among the drones. While I had not found a colony of chitin-drones, about one in twenty drones I saw had some kind of biological augmentation. Sometimes it was

minor, like an extra pair of eyes that widened their field of view, but in other cases I saw heavy modifications. One prime example was a drone covered in red chitin similar to Jasper, but in this case the shell was thicker, and one hand had been modified into a giant claw. An obvious combat model.

The average drone population as well seemed far more tolerant of abnormalities. Admittedly from what I saw some of the modified drones were still given a wide berth by those around them, but this was reserved mainly for the larger combat models, and the distance seemed to be for more practical reasons like avoiding the spikes and claws these variants often sported.

"Best pick your jaw off the floor kid. You look like a country bumpkin with your eyes rolling every which way," said Jasper to my confusion.

"My jaw is firmly attached?"

"HA! You're a riot kid."

Oh, I suppose I had been staring. There were just too many details to keep track off. Maybe I should form an extra pair of eyes like Jasper's later, they seemed common enough to not attract attention.

We eventually stopped in front of a building that outwardly looked a little plain in comparison to some I had seen. What really set it apart was the wonderful smells I was detecting coming from the bottom floor. The front had been modified into a glass wall with metal bars welded over it, and above the entrance were large illuminated

symbols displaying "Maggie's Sunrise Diner ."

"Ah, here we are! Nice right? She runs a good diner. Com'on, I'll introduce you," Jasper said as he led the way to the entrance. The door had a simple bar to push and pull, and glass set into the metal frame so you could see the other side. When Jasper pushed the door open a small alarm chimed once! But, I guess this was fine? He went in as if this was completely normal.

The air smelled even better on the inside. On the left side of the room were dozens of devices that I didn't recognize, made of metal and polished until you could see your reflection in them. Separating the room from them was a long barrier with a flat surface, next to which were thin round seats embedded into the floor by a single support bar underneath. On the right hand side were lots of cushioned seats arranged to wrap around flat tables that stuck out of the wall. It seemed that this place expected drones to stay and eat their food here. All the dispensaries in the subway area had given the food inside of containers that the drone could take with them.

"I'll be with you in a moment! Just cleaning up after the lunch rush, sit anywhe- JASPER!"

The drone who had spoken came from an opening behind the counter. Short, stout, with brown fur on her head tied into a bundle, and a stained red covering 'she' wore across the front. She had a scowl on her face that made me think of an angry brown-fur, and she stomped up to Jasper in a manner I found similarly intimidating.

Estimated threat level: moderate.

"I thought I told you I didn't want to see your face in here again! I don't allow dealing in my diner!"

"But Maggie, I'm n-"

"Don't you 'but Maggie' me! Last time you got caught the cops came in here thinking I was a damned drug den! I'm trying to make a *living* here Jasper!"

"Maggie I-"

"And who is this you dragged in with you? Huh? What's he strung out on?"

"I'm not dealing Maggie! Promise! The kids just a tourist! Got caught up with some of the Espada and I thought I'd help him out."

"Out of the kindness of your heart I'm sure." Then she turned to me, "Well kid? He blowing hot air or what?"

I looked between the two of them. Maggie sternly glaring at me, and Jasper's wide eyes that he kept moving to try and signal something. I was pretty sure we were in danger, too bad I couldn't understand what Jasper was trying to convey. I decided to stick to the important truth.

"He said he'd buy me a burger."

At this she eyed me up and down and I went still. If she attacked I was running.

Finally her glare ended and she sighed; "Fine, fine, grab a booth, I just swept the counter. Two number one's I'm assuming? You got the cash for this Jasper?"

"I've got a chit Maggie."

"Hand it over."

"Aw Maggie, I'm good for it you know that."

"Want I should bust your arm?"

"Right here ma'am, I've got it right here."

He handed her one of the flat rectangles I saw drones using at the subway. She brought it over to a device sitting on the 'counter' while Jasper led me over to one of the 'booths'. After inserting the 'chit' Maggie grunted in what seemed like surprise. Then she filled two glass containers with water and brought them over to our table, as well as giving the chit back to Jasper. "Two tofu burgers then?"

"And a side order of fries Maggie."

"Yeah yeah."

She went behind the counter and into a side room, from which the sounds of banging metal soon came. Over the next twenty minutes Jasper talked to me about a variety of topics, mainly centered on his 'burgeoning business', and trying to convince me that he was the best information broker in the sector. As he talked the smells coming from the room behind the counter increased, and I found my eyes wandering over to the entrance in anticipation more than once.

Finally Maggie emerged holding a tray laden with food. She placed the container of what I assumed were the 'fries' between us, and then gave each of us a flat disc with what must be a 'burger' on it before heading back behind the counter. It was a lot different from the nutrient slurry I was used to, appearing to be various layers of solid organic material layered on top of each other. The smell coming from it was wonderful.

Across from me Jasper reached over to some small paper packets set up next to the wall. Ripping one open, he poured it into his glass of water which turned a bright pink color. Then he grabbed a few fries and placed them inside his burger before saying, "Bon Appetite!" and taking a bite. I followed his example before taking a bite of my own.

The next thing I knew, my burger was gone.

Estimated resource return: 85%

I had eaten the entire burger in a few short moments, unable to stop myself. It just tasted so good! I had never imagined that something *could* taste this good. And the resource return was phenomenal, the nutrients packed into the burger so densely that it was better than an equal amount of the yellow-fur flesh by a wide margin. I had underestimated drone ingenuity yet again, this burger was truly *made* to be eaten.

Although eating it that quickly may have been an error. Jasper was looking at me wide-eyed, and he hadn't even finished eating his first bite. Was my disguise compromised? Maybe. He finished chewing and swallowing his bite of burger before saying:

"Liked the burger huh kid?"

He was still using 'kid'. That was good. I guess I'd answer his questions for now. He had been decidedly non-hostile so far, I could always run.

"It's the best thing I've ever tasted."

"It, I, but. Shoot kid! It's just fake meat on a bun!"

"WHAT WAS THAT!?"

"N-nothing Maggie! Kid really loves your burgers!"

Jasper continued in a lower voice, "When was the last time you've eaten kid?"

Hmm, not counting the coffee it was the yellow-fur meat...

26 hours, 34 minutes, 44 seconds;

"Yesterday morning."

Jasper eyed me for a moment before sighing, and then he slowly pushed his plate, with the burger on it, to me.

"Here kid, but eat it slow for God's sake."

He... he was giving his burger to me?

I was suddenly very glad that I hadn't killed him back in the sewer.

I ate as slow as possible, savoring it, while Jasper nibbled on the fries, uncharacteristically quiet. He appeared to be thinking about something intensely before he said, "So which is it kid, mutavus, or a bad trigger?"

Eh? What were those?

"Oh don't give me that look. You obviously aren't a normy. No normal person fights four people with knives, one a super I might add, and wins. Or walks through miles of unlit tunnels without a care. I thought you might be a plant when you followed me from the station and then conveniently 'saved' me, but if you are you're the worst plant I've ever seen. So it's one of four things. One, your benedici decided to be extra nice to you and you're joy-riding it like an idiot. Two, you had a good trigger, and again are joy-riding it like an idiot. Three, you have mutavus and you got kicked out, or you're running. Four, you had a bad trigger and you're running. Now a bad plant you might be, but you don't strike me as an idiot. So which is it?"

I didn't know how to react to this. He knew I had been following him? That was way too many new terms. I at least knew one thing he said.

"I'm running."

"Thought so. Got your ticket stub still?"

I did, and I showed it to him.

"Good, you ain't stupid. That ticket works for two trips, I recommend using it to go back where you came from. If you triggered bad the capes will help, you can't be blamed for a bad trigger event. If its mutavus, then I'm sorry to hear it, but you should go to the cops, they can give you resources."

I considered what he said. Apparently me being an escaped bio-weapon wasn't on his list of possibilities, which was telling.

"And if I can't go back?"

His expression became grim, and he considered what I said for a bit.

"Pass me your ticket stub a second."

I slid it over to him, and he pulled out a small thin rod. With it he inscribed several symbols onto the material before sliding it back to me.

"If you really have no other option, go to the address here tomorrow. By then they should be hiring, you might be able to earn some money if you play it smart. And *don't* mention I told you about this... unless you do well of course."

He got up from the booth.

"Now I've gotta run kid, business to get done. Eat your burger and stay smart, Odd Summer is right around the corner."

And then he left, grabbing a handful of fries on the way, and muttering about bleeding hearts and losing his mind under his breath.

I considered his advice.

"Hey Maggie?"

"What's up hun?"

"Can I trust Jasper?"

She barked a laugh and scoffed at this.

"He's a greasy weasel and his fake accents aren't worth the dime they stop on... but he is the best information broker in E13. He's good at that at least."

I kept eating my burger.

I didn't leave on the subway.

And when I tasted the pink water I nearly 'lost my damned mind'.

Ch8 Rat Meat

This was the first time I ever had so much energy stockpiled. The 'pink lemonade' had turned out to basically be pure 'sugar' with a little flavoring. Once I realized this I began adding as many of the packets to my drink as I could; 'Cola', 'Orange Pop', 'Citrus Surge', and one particularly sugar rich packet called 'Nectar'. Maggie got a little angry with me when she realized how many packets I had added (and a little worried that I had drunk the whole thing), but when I offered to pay her the rest of my money she looked at the few coins I had and said she'd just add it to Jasper's 'tab'. I decided not to test my good fortune and left soon after.

Mass at 47% norm.

Energy reserves = 6 cycles continued operation.

And that was *continuous* operation, with no hibernating and no rationing. I had fallen to about one and a half cycles of energy after fighting the blade-drone, and this single meal had given me over four cycles worth of energy by itself. Six cycles continuous was *double* my record maximum.

Of course, I was going to have to factor in fights against impossible anomalous drones into any future calculations. I had been shot at by high explosives and nearly stabbed to death so far, and the cycle wasn't over yet, it was still only three hours after the midpoint. So far escaping the test chambers hadn't increased my survival odds by as much as I had hoped, but at least the food was definitely worth it.

For now I wandered around the section of the city around Maggie's diner. My plan was to scout out the location Jasper had mentioned

and then head to the sewer for the night. All I had to figure out was how to use the symbols Jasper had drawn to navigate. I could read them but I didn't know how to use them. Oh well, if I couldn't figure it out I'd go ask Maggie. For now I wanted to explore my new home.

I had decided to stay in this section of the city. An easy decision, any physical alterations I made wouldn't stand out and overall security seemed far laxer here. Plus, places to hide were in surplus supply. I noticed many a building that seemed in disuse, not to mention the possibilities of the tunnel system. If I mastered moving using the tunnel system, like Jasper seemed to imply was possible, keeping a hidden den was a definite option.

I started to focus on the symbols on the buildings around me. Many buildings had signs or just plaques displaying 'letters' and 'numbers'. Open and Closed signs were the predominate symbols used, which made sense if these were all dispensaries. Some symbols seemed to be rather useless, if colorful, inscribed onto the sides of buildings and any other open surface. Often pictures accompanied the symbols, although if these were meant to convey meaning there seemed to be a lot of random static in the message. I quickly focused only on the symbols that seemed to be mechanically manufactured.

> Navigation system detected: plaques on buildings and symbols on posted signs correlate to 'address'.

Ah, that made sense. A few symbols to label a specific street and a number to narrow down which building on the street. I started to walk from intersection to intersection reading the signs, but a quick calculation on the size of this hive made me realize this was truly inefficient. I could wander for days before finding it. I decided to ask

a passing drone for directions.

"Excuse me, do you know where I can find this address?" and I showed it the paper. It looked at the symbols, but once it read the address their brow furrowed and it looked me over worriedly.

"Um, you sure this is where you want to go?"

"Yes, I need to go here."

"Well alright I guess, you just head south from here and make a left when you hit Ashwood St."

"Okay, thank you."

Now if only I knew what 'south' was.

The next couple drones I asked all gave me similar answers, from which I was able to triangulate the general direction of south. The reaction of the drones was widely varied once they realized where it was I wanted to get to. Some became friendlier, others warned me that it was a 'rough neighborhood', and one in particular refused to speak to me any further.

I started heading towards Ashwood St. and slowly the general design of the buildings started to change the farther I went 'south'. Now they had five to six floors each, with more structured walkways both

bypassing the street and connecting them to each other, in some places this created large dark areas where enough walkways together blocked the sun. Bright lighting devices attempted to light these areas where they weren't broken. The somewhat disused look continued to be prevalent despite the increase in drone traffic here.

I walked up some steps to get to the third floor walkways. Sunlight lit this level and it was easier to see potential threats coming. The nearly dark ground level had looked increasingly dangerous, with a noticeable increase in combat model drones just sort of loitering around.

Multiple blocks went by without me having to descend back to the ground floor, passing by what appeared to be dispensaries, although I neither saw nor smelled food, and the signs left something to be desired in informing me what the purpose of these places was. Maybe the signs were in disrepair as well?

Eventually I reached an intersection with a street sign declaring "Ashwood St." To both my left and right the walkways had become simply a solid surface, and except for small fenced-off breaks here and there I could no longer see the ground floor. It seems this street was not intended to be available to transport devices, instead requiring you walk along the enlarged pathway while any transport devices had to pass underneath. A space saving measure I suppose.

I went left, scanning the numbers along the buildings until I reached the one that matched the address Jasper had given me. The building it belonged to was rather unremarkable, like the others it had an entrance at walkway level, but it had no visible dispensary or sign displaying its purpose. I wasn't at the wrong place, the number on the wall by the door was indeed 512, and the address Jasper had given me was 512 Ashwood St.

Annoying, I didn't like knowing so little about what I was getting into, but I didn't want to linger in the area. I hadn't modified my disguise yet, and I still wasn't exactly sure how Jasper knew I had followed him from the subway. If he could notice me so could others, so for now I would leave and work on making my disguise better. It seems that while my disguise looking young was good for interactions with most drones, like with Maggie and Jasper, it wasn't very good at dissuading would be predators.

Because I was being followed.

I had picked up my stalker on the way to the job site, so at least I knew it wasn't someone from the job itself. Not really sure what they wanted, but that didn't really matter. I knew I currently appeared weak, and weakness attracted predators. Or at least, those who thought they were predators.

I knew it was following me from their footsteps, even and constant ever since I traveled through a shadowed overhang on my way to Ashwood St. When I turned around to head back I noted three drones that might belong to the footsteps. One normal drone looking into a dispensary window. Another normal drone appearing to loiter, and gazing out over one of the gaps in the walkway. And one combat drone with scales and long claws on its fingers, strolling up the path more slowly than its leg length suggested it needed to. These drones hadn't been here when I first walked by, so one of them had to be my stalker.

I headed back to where Jasper and I had exited the tunnel system. The whole way there I listened for the footsteps, sometimes lost

among small crowds, sometimes obscured by passing transport devices, but when things quieted down there they were again. They hadn't tried to close on me yet, there were too many other drones around, but eventually the amount of drones would thin as we strayed farther from Ashwood. The sun was also getting lower in the 'sky' and many of the drones were heading home for the 'night'.

I waited until I passed a larger cluster of drones, hiding myself from view among them. Before I passed the crowd completely I ducked around the next corner into an alley and started running. Right, left, right, straight, I burned some of my extra energy to put some speed into it, and sped through the alleys behind the buildings to try and lose my pursuer. I had heard the footsteps behind me at first picking up speed, but I had plenty of energy and just stayed at top speed until I finally lost them. I ran an extra few blocks just to be safe.

From here navigation was easy, the buildings around Maggie's diner were more organized then near Ashwood, arranged into perfectly square blocks, and eventually I turned into the alley where the tunnel entrance was. I walked over to the barrier, and checked my surroundings one last time before I twisted the handle open and entered the tunnel, closing the barrier behind me.

It was dark of course, but I simply adjusted my eyes into a lower spectrum until I could see. I was still disappointed I hadn't thought to disguise this ability from Jasper, but *he* had walked into the dark first and I had thought it was normal for drones. Jasper's eyes had looked normal enough to me, despite having four of them.

Now then, the next order of business was to acquire mass. The meal and sugar had filled my energy reserves, but I was still really low on

mass and I would likely need more for whatever this job was. From context it was easy to understand that a job was a task, and doing said task would earn me a reward, in this case money. In that way it was basically a puzzle test like back in the test chambers.

I began exploring the tunnels in earnest, looking for any signs of biological life. Quickly I started encountering things like scratch marks in the stone, or stains from long ago kills and waste disposal. Apparently Jasper really did know these tunnels well, because he had threaded us through all the areas that saw biological traffic.

I was walking through a stone corridor when I heard noise coming from around the next corner. Slowly I stalked up to it and extended one of my eyes on a tendril to peek around the bend. The corridor continued a ways until it terminated in a wall with several broken pipes sticking out of it. Piles of trash had been gathered up in the corners and formed into some kind of nests, and occupying these nests were a type of organism that was surprisingly familiar to me.

Gray-furs! Or 'rats' which I assume is the drone designation for them. I hadn't seen these in a long time. In the early days of combat testing they had been a frequent opponent, but as I grew stronger and smarter they had been replaced with stronger organisms until I no longer saw them. True, these ones here were quite a bit larger than the ones in the test chambers, but they still weren't comparable with say, a yellow-fur. They only came up to around my knees. There were five big ones that I could see, and numerous tiny ones milling around.

Estimated combat potential: negligible to moderate.

If all the rats attacked as one then I might be in a little trouble, but I doubted they would be that coordinated. Just in case I did a few

modifications to myself. First I changed my feet to be clawed instead of the 'shoes' that drones favored to increase traction. Then I increased the length of my arms so I wouldn't have to bend so far to attack them, plus I could use my arms to assist in running. I looked somewhat skeletal now, having used even more of my torso flesh to reinforce my limbs. Lastly I attached the blade I stole from the Espada to my wrist so I could use it to stab without holding it.

Checking around the corner again, I waited until one of the closest rats was looking away before I charged. My plan was to take as many of them by surprise as I could before they tried to swarm me.

I reached the first rat and struck, stabbing my blade briefly into the base of it's skull. It shuddered and collapsed as I ran for the next one. It saw me coming and tried to lash out, but it was too slow and I had better reach, allowing me to stab my blade into its eye. This didn't kill it immediately and I was forced to hold it down with one hand while I ground the blade around to destroy its brain.

I finished and prepared to defend myself from the swarm... which hadn't made to attack me? They were all running away! I had expected them to take advantage of their numbers and try to overwhelm me, but instead they were scrambling for the broken pipes at the end of the tunnel. If I didn't hurry they would all get away!

I ran after them and killed whatever I caught up to. Unfortunately this meant I killed just five of the tiny rats. The other three large rats all managed to find a big enough pipe to escape into. Quickly I found myself alone in the corridor.

I had made a slight miscalculation. I had expected the rat's behavior

to match what those in the test chambers had done, namely try to swarm all at once and hope for the best. But out here where we weren't stuck in a cage the obvious strategy was to run when an unknown predator attacked. I had done the exact same thing barely two hours ago after all.

Oh well. Learn and adapt.

I collected the corpses and began to eat. They were... disappointing, the corpses were mostly fur, skin, and bone, the muscles stringy, and fat content almost non-existent. To say nothing of the taste, bleh. I just let the micro units absorb them after I tried the first bite.

Come to think of it what did the rats eat down here? Beyond the odd organic stain I hadn't detected anything that even hinted at a food supply down here. Maybe they raided the surface for food?

Mass at 62% norm.

Better, if not quite where I wanted to be. Looking around I decided to check the nests for anything the rats might have left behind. If they were living here they might have stashed *something* edible.

Shredded paper, bags labeled "Recyclable Plastic", dirt, old fur, all of it was caked into the crevices of chewed metal and stone to make soft resting spots. All of it basically useless to me. I tore some of the nest apart to see if I could at least get some useful material.

And a coin rolled out from under the pile. I grabbed it.

Yep, it was a real Dime piece. I started to thoroughly tear the nest apart and a cascade of shiny objects fell out. Not all of it was coins, I noticed a few small pieces of bent metal with shiny rocks embedded into them, and some pieces of colored glass, but there was easily over five dollars in coins here. I excitedly gathered up all the coins, even if this hunt hadn't gone too well I might still be able to afford another burger which to me was an even better prize.

They tasted so good.

I finished checking the nests and started to head back to the tunnel entrance. All together with the coins I already had, I had gathered seven dollars and thirty four cents.

I reached the round barrier and started shifting back to my disguise, but I changed the arm design this time. Rather than return them to normal I would just change the bone structure a bit and compress them. This way I could extend them to max range quickly without having to spend resources shifting them every time I came down here to hunt. Luckily drones often wore coverings that encased their arms, and I changed my torso covering to do just that, along with changing the color to black. Hopefully this would fit in better with the styles I had seen.

Once done I climbed up the bars to the entrance, spinning the handle to open it. Hopefully Maggie's diner would still be open by the time I got there.

"Don't move."

Damn.

I had barely stuck my torso out of the entrance when it spoke. It was the drone who had been loitering, as well as a different drone I didn't recognize.

And the new one was holding one of those projectile weapons. It was smaller and fit into a single hand, but the design was too similar to be anything else.

"Get out of the tunnel and drop whatever you have. No sudden moves."

Hmm, it was just the two of them here, and only one of them had a weapon. The main concern of the projectile weapons was that they punched a hole through flesh easily, but it was just one gun this time. It couldn't do much damage to me by itself, and the chances of it hitting my shielded core from this position were rather low.

"Move it you-"

"Have you both just been waiting here the past two hours? That seems like poor risk/return calculation." I interrupted.

"Shut it! You went back and forth between Ashwood and the tunnels,

don't even think of lying. You've found something down there or you're doing a cowl delivery. Now hand it over or tell us where it is!"

"Can I ask how you tracked me here at least?"

"You littl-"

Both my arms snapped out and I grabbed each of them by the throat. Then I let myself drop into the tunnel, gripping the bars with my feet to give me extra leverage. They struggled and battered at my arms, but my grip was too strong and they didn't have a way of severing the limbs before I pulled them into the tunnel head first.

Then I let them drop.

I looked around briefly for witnesses before descending back into the tunnel, making sure to close the top barrier behind me and sealing the tunnel into darkness again.

Looks like this was a successful hunt after all.

Side Dish #1

"Why is there a hole in the window?"

"Yes, that is rather odd isn't it?" replied Dr. Mason.

"Odd nothing, it's more crap is what it is. We've got a ton of stuff to do and they're keeping us waiting in a drafty conference room for an *emergency* meeting they haven't shown up for. I doubt they even realize how important the work is right now. Like we need a little pow wow to tell us the entire project's going sideways! We should be downstairs fixing things, I still haven't figured out exactly what caused the nanites to fail in the damn cougar."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out Bret."

"If I can get back to work sure... and it's *cold* in here," said Bret, too worked up to acknowledge the attempt at consolation.

"I'm sure they'll be here soon, this mishap has undoubtedly created quite a bit of paperwork at the top end of things as well."

Only Bret's respect for Dr. Mason kept him from voicing what he thought about that. To Bret paperwork was a necessary evil in order to record results, and the fact that Dr. Mason handled most of it for the project meant he held his tongue on the subject.

Regardless, they weren't kept waiting much longer. The door to the room opened, and in walked a short man in an immaculate black suit, shoes shined to a reflection and his black hair slicked back with gel. The picture would have been perfect if he weren't straining to maneuver while holding both his briefcase and a cardboard box filled with cables and cassette tapes.

"Sorry to keep you gentlemen waiting. Had to get permission to retrieve these tapes."

He walked over to the other side of the table and placed down the box, followed by his briefcase.

"Dr. Mason, Mr. Savvy, it's nice to meet you. You can call me Mr. Slick, I work for New Dawn's president directly as a sort of rapid response man. I'd like to go over a few things concerning the state of your project, I've been reading over the reports and I must say it's interesting stuff," said Mr. Slick with a smile, as he proceeded to open his briefcase and began pulling out papers. "Using nanobots to attempt to control the mutavus virus. Makes for a much more interesting read than most of the paperwork I usually have to go through."

He finished pulling out papers and closed the heavy briefcase with a clunk.

"Now to get to the point. Concerning recent events New Dawn Inc. has decided to put this project on hold. It seems-"

Bret popped out of his chair upon hearing this.

"You can't! We were finally getting somewhere! We've worked too damn hard on this!"

"Sit down Mr. Savvy," replied Mr. Slick, his friendly demeanor suddenly absent. The room had already been drafty, but now the temperature felt like it had dropped several degrees, the warmth stolen by Mr. Slick's frown. Bret cringed and sat, remembering who it was that Mr. Slick reported to. This was another reason why Bret normally left dealing with the paper pushers to Dr. Mason, he just didn't have the temperament for it.

"Now then!" said Mr. Slick, his smile right back in place. "While I do need to discuss with you both the state of the project, the reason the project is being put on hold is that Odd Summer has started somewhat early this time around. All biological projects are being put on hold for now, not just yours."

"So it's already been confirmed then?" asked Dr. Mason.

"Not officially, but it was this whole incident with your project that confirms it. I took the liberty of speeding up the autopsy on the cougar. While there isn't any trace of the nanobots, there also isn't any evidence of the normal wear and tear caused by rapid mutation and growth. The cougar triggered gentlemen, mutavus had nothing to do with it."

"Of course! That explains the speed of it, I thought the nanites... Dr. Mason if we check the data we should have a perfect recording of a fauna trigger event!" said Bret.

Dr. Mason chuckled at the sudden reversal of Bret's mood.

"You see Bret, what do I always tell you? Just a setback!"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't celebrate just yet Mr. Savvy, Dr. Mason," interjected Mr. Slick. "Now, I have some slightly more sobering news to impart to you both. You see, while this project is currently being shelved due to Odd Summer, there has been some question as to whether or not to restart it upon Odd Summer's end. You see, this endeavor has not quite been meeting it's project goals, and its been brought into question whether or not the *significant* expenses to keep the project running are worth the results."

"But, we've been making lots of progress. The scientific value alone..."

"Believe me, I understand the scientific value of your results so far Dr. Mason. However, New Dawn Inc. is a *weapons* manufacturer, and when it was agreed to fund this little venture the both of you promised that you could deliver a *weapon* from your research. A promise you have not yet delivered on."

"But the prototype was performing well! Yes it died to the cougar, but you can't expect a prototype to win against full blown super powers! Especially not in its first real world encounter."

"That is one of the reasons why this is still up for discussion Mr. Savvy. Please, let me outline the situation a bit more precisely, things are a little more complicated than they appear and I have some

things here which should help to show why we are apprehensive about this project."

Mr. Slick began to unpack the box of electronics he had brought with him, from it he removed several cables, cassettes, a portable screen, and what appeared to be an antique cassette player.

"Now, as the accident happened in the middle of the night we don't have any eyewitnesses to what happened. Luckily we do in fact have a recording of the test chamber. Which is what I have with me here," Mr. Slick said, as he finished withdrawing components from the box and began assembling them.

"We do? I thought electronic surveillance was a security risk?" replied Dr. Mason.

"If we could have had electronic recordings that would have made things much easier until now," added Bret sullenly.

"Ah, well as you are both aware these biological weapons experiments are not, in the strictest sense, completely legal, necessitating the lack of electronic recording and the excessive pen and paper work."

Both Mason and Bret deflated a bit at the reminder of the legality of the project. They had known what they were getting into beforehand of course, but they had felt that the chance of finding a possible method of prevention for mutavus outweighed the risks.

"Now this little device is a VHS recorder. Practically an ancient relic, but what it lacks in modern features it makes up for in the fact that it records the footage onto a physical tape and not an electronic file, thus preventing any passing technopaths from being able to see what it records. They'd have to physically grab the tape and watch it from the player, and this little device was set up to both wipe the tape every couple of days and self-destruct if someone tries to tamper with it. That's the reason I was late, had to call the President himself and get the passwords for it."

"Wait, so we actually do have security tapes for the lower floors then?" asked Bret.

"No no, this was the only one set up and it only overlooked the test chamber. He said it was a little extra security since we are dealing with bio-weapons, but between you and me I think he just likes to watch the fights."

"Watch the fights..."

"You know how eccentric they can be," replied Mr. Slick as he finished plugging the VHS player into a small portable screen and turned it on before inserting a cassette. "I've taken the liberty of forwarding it to the beginning of the combat test in question."

The screen lit up, displaying the test chamber. From the position it looked like the camera was mounted on the ceiling pointing at the test chamber window. Inside the test chamber was the prototype and the two cougars, one of them already dead. As the tape played it showed them what they had already seen, the rapid growth of the cougar, the prototype's escape, and the cougar angrily attacking the mesh as its arm regrew.

"The next interesting part happens about an hour after everyone goes home for the night," said Mr. Slick who then began forwarding the tape. "Right around... here."

Again the tape showed the test chamber with the cougar sleeping inside.

But then the prototype, clearly seen, simply walked on screen from the left before stopping in front of the test chamber. The scientist's eyes went wide.

"That can't be, the prototype escaped first?" said Bret.

"Oh it gets better, keep watching Mr. Savvy."

The prototype wandered out of the field of view, whereupon Mr. Slick forwarded the tape slightly. Again the prototype appeared before it began to carve through the window and began throwing pieces of the window at the cougar. The cougar finally attacked, the prototype ran, and the cougar broke through the hole to get into the lab proper before running off-screen after the prototype, whereupon Mr. Slick stopped the tape and turned to the two dumbfounded scientists.

"Now then, it kind of looks like your prototype escaped its chamber just to commit suicide-via-cougar doesn't it? I don't suppose you two could shed some light on this? "

Both scientists were silent, unable to explain what they had just seen. Finally Dr. Mason spoke, "It, it looks like it was trying to goad the cougar into attacking it by targeting the corpse of the sibling, could it have understood what it was doing Bret?"

"N-no, its not that smart, it thinks by trial and error. It probably noted the reaction from the cougar when its throw went wild. That part is in line with its programming."

"And what about carving through the window? That glass is tinker designed," asked Mr. Slick.

"The nanites build and dismantle at the atomic level. With enough time and energy they could probably burrow through anything," answered Bret.

"Isn't that somewhat dangerous? You do remember the gray goo incident twelve years ago do you not?"

"No, a disaster like that would have been literally impossible for the prototype, I made sure of it at the start of the project. The nanites self-destruct if they don't receive a signal from the core after a couple seconds. It's built into the physical design, can't be bypassed."

"I've heard more than one tinker claim the same about their devices Mr. Savvy."

"He's right Mr. Slick," interjected Dr. Mason. "At the hardware level the nanites and core are more like molecular clockwork than programmable machines. I checked over the design myself when we started the project. We wouldn't have gone ahead without that fail-safe."

"Hmm, I see. What about it leaving the test chamber?"

"That... that I'm not sure of," said Bret, "It was supposed to follow orders when it received them, but it had automatic protocols to follow otherwise, one of which is trial and error in a combat situation. When one of its combat tactics failed it was supposed to try something new. Admittedly exiting the test chamber is a leap in logic, but it did seem to be getting more original in its tactics over the past dozen or so tests. I'll need time to go over the memory dumps to really figure it out."

"I see, well in that case I suppose I only have one more question that remains unanswered."

At this Mr. Slick pointed at the window. Both scientists looked, and after a second their gazes snapped to the hole in the window.

The carved hole.

"H-how long has that been there?"

"A guard reported it this morning. It's what caused me to be called

for, although when I arrived I expected a break-in, now I'm thinking it's more along the lines of a break-*out*."

Mr. Slick turned to the two horrified scientists, "I don't suppose you could convince me that hole is entirely coincidental and that the prototype is definitely dead could you?"

Neither scientist spoke up.

"Pity. Then I must ask, is there any way this could be traced back to New Dawn Inc.?"

Bret snapped out of his fugue at that.

"You can't be serious? We need to warn people!"

"I already have. I sent a report to Central stating we had confirmed an animal trigger, a clear indicator that Odd Summer is starting. New Dawn Inc. is dedicated to holding back the horrors that Odd Summer brings as well as cleaning up the aftermath, but we can't do any of that if a bunch of **capes** are breathing down our necks and holding back progress can we? *Do I make myself clear?*"

"I, I, bu-"

"Crystal Mr. Slick," said Dr. Mason as he put his hand on Bret's shoulder. "We quite understand the situation."

Bret looked at Dr. Mason before his gaze sank to the floor, his shoulders slumped.

"Good. As for the prototype our agents will keep an eye out for it, although I doubt they'll find anything with Odd Summer in effect. An escaped monster isn't exactly at the top of the list of strange things right now. Is there anything else you can tell me about it that might help them find it?"

"Its physical abilities are all detailed in the reports," said Dr. Mason. "As for behavior, if it's still following protocol it will prioritize survival. Learn from combat, map the area, um, seek tactical advantages, avoid major threats..." Dr. Mason trailed off.

"... and eat when its hungry," finished Bret.

"Mm, I see," Mr. Slick turned to the window. "Well keep your chins up gentlemen, with Odd Summer starting there's always the chance it will crawl into a hole and die before it ever sees another person, there's plenty of scarier things out there after all." Mr Slick turned back to the two of them, cheap smile back in full force. "Now then, lets discuss personnel reassignments."

Ch9 Will Work For Food

Drones are even more interesting on the inside than the outside.

After I dropped the two ambushers down the tunnel the one with the projectile weapon managed to survive (barely), and I managed to interrogate it before it succumbed to its wounds. From what I got out of it the drone who followed me is a 'tracker', and after it followed me to the tunnel entrance it called for it's 'friend' because they owned a 'gun'. Apparently it had at first just planned to take money from an 'easy mark', but when I traveled back and forth between Ashwood Street and the tunnels it had suspected I had something more valuable. Perhaps one of those 'gizmos' that Jasper had mentioned?

My amateur autopsy of the two drones revealed quite a few things, namely that drones also have internal variants. Between the both of them I got a good idea of what a normal drone might be like which raised questions (why have several redundant organs but only one heart?), and the tracker drone specifically had some interesting modifications, namely to its olfactory sense organs. Whereas the drone with the gun seemed to have a normal concentration of cells to detect smells (similar to what I used) the tracker had nearly *forty times* as many cells, as well as extra modifications to its processing center which I assume were to handle the extra information processing.

Normally I would call this level of sensory intake to be overkill, but if it works it works. I was sure I had outrun the tracker by a large enough margin to lose it, but with this powerful of a sensory organ it could probably smell the barest residue left behind from when my feet hit the ground. I'd have to think of a countermeasure.

Other than the organs and enhancements I also learned that drones are much better eating than rats. Lots of fats, oils, and useful cell structures, which isn't surprising if Maggie's burgers are any indication of their normal eating habits. Between the two I had more than replenished my missing mass and increased my energy reserves even further. At this rate I would probably have to recalculate my norms for resource management. Obviously the white-coats had kept me somewhat starved.

Once I was done disposing of the remains (making sure to record the tracker design for later) I examined the 'gun', being extra careful to point it away from my core. It seemed like a simple enough device. A handle to hold it, the hole where the projectile came from, and a little lever which was most likely the trigger. Attempting to test the weapon wound up with nothing happening when I pulled the trigger. After I fiddled with all the movable parts to see if that would make it work, I eventually gave up and dismantled it. The problem was immediately apparent, while it looked functional on the outside the insides were rusted and ill-maintained. It was basically just a fused lump of metal at this point. I did recover what was most likely the ammo supply, two small canisters filled with a volatile chemical powder. These I dismantled and absorbed since the chemicals were more useful to me as raw resources, although I did record its composition like I did the tracker design.

Done with my examination of the weapon I again had to adjust my disguise. Now that I had more mass I had to compress myself a bit more to maintain the look. I wanted to continue to use my current young appearance as it seemed to trigger a cooperative instinct in some drones like Jasper and Maggie, and caused other drones like my would be ambushers to underestimate me. While it *had* been the reason I was targeted in the first place, even that was to my benefit. If opportunists like these two drones had to rely on targeting the weak then they would be no match for me, and since they did not seem to have the support of the general drone network they would most likely not be missed. Hopefully more would fall for the same trap.

Disguise adjusted I left the tunnels to go to Maggie's, but when I arrived the diner was dark, and a closed sign was hung on the door. I had spent too long examining the drones and Maggie had closed the diner for the night. Disappointment.

Instead I trudged back to the tunnels, deciding to hibernate until the sun rose again. At least, I assumed it would. I was still having trouble with the mechanics of the 'sun'. A giant ball of flame that rose out of the ground and then traveled across the ceiling. Would it rise from the other direction next cycle? Or did it make some loop through a different area before coming back around? The shape of this space was odd, very confusing. I had noticed being confused more and more often lately. When I had been walking to Maggie's I had actually tripped, had to be more careful about that. And that blade drone! How do those blades work? Nearly cut me to pieces. Bite sized pieces. All the different organs and pieces. Why so many filter organs? Confusing confusing. I want a burger...

> Human.exe shutdown;
>
> Abnormal process activity detected: analyzing...
>
> Drone processor center analogous to Human.exe processor requirements.
>
> Drone cycle logged at 24 hours. Drone rest cycle estimated at 6-10 hours.
>
> Former up-time of Human.exe: 144.35 hours.
>
> Estimated recovery time: 7.4 hours.
>
> Combat potential critically reduced while Human.exe inactive: hibernation recommended.

It retreated to the tunnels and slept.

I woke up in the tunnels, just a little ways off from the entrance, my memories of the previous day surfacing quickly. Unpleasant. Apparently I couldn't keep myself active indefinitely. I hadn't noticed the problem before because I sometimes hibernated to conserve resources, but since the yellow-fur incident I had been operating almost continuously to absorb more details and plan my escape. Up until now I used extra blood flow and cell renewal to compensate, but apparently that wouldn't work in the long run. Annoying, I finally get enough resources to operate continuously and it turns out there is a hard limit.

But Maggie's should be open now! I suddenly realized.

I quickly ascended to the surface and made my way to the diner. When I entered the diner was a lot more crowded, and a different drone dressed similarly to Maggie introduced itself before seating me at the counter this time. When I asked where Maggie was the 'waitress' told me that Maggie was cooking in the back and didn't normally deal directly with 'customers'. It gave me a 'menu' with lots of symbols and thanks to the pictures it wasn't hard to find what I wanted. Between what I had saved and what I pulled off the drones I had enough for the listed prices and I ordered myself another tofu burger.

While I waited I casually observed the busy diner, several of the drones eating were combat drones and I avoided staring too long (this was apparently 'rude'), and in a corner was a large screen displaying talking drones. No sound came from them, but underneath

scrolling symbols went by.

"...as been confirmed, Friday will be the last day of school before they shutdown for the summer. Fortress City officials would like to remind all citizens to report suspicious occurrences to Central as soon as possible, as well as to wear identification armbands to facilitate police response. In other news..."

I was getting better with reading the symbols, but some of the words still escaped me. I didn't know what Friday was, but I had seen Fortress City printed around often enough to realize it meant this particular giant hive structure that the drones and I were living in. Slowly I was learning which symbols corresponded with which words.

Eventually the 'waitress' came with my food, and I ate it as slowly as I could (though I couldn't resist taking two packets of the drink mix to go with it). As I ate I heard a lot of drones talking about a variety of topics; C's, cowls, capes, Hellion, villains, Central, "those damn armbands", mutavus, Wandergheist, Turbo, heros, the bus explosion caused by the Merc yesterday, and a large amount of various other miscellaneous events. But the one that really dominated conversation was that 'Odd Summer' was starting. Apparently this was regarded as generally bad (mostly by the combat drones), however several drones seemed excited about the increased opportunity it would bring.

Once I was done eating I paid the 'bill' (I was really surprised that the norm is to pay *afterwards*) and began heading to Ashwood St.

I mulled over what I had overheard in the diner. Apparently this 'Odd Summer' was a period of time marked by uncertainty, which fit with why Jasper would deem it necessary to warn a young, inexperienced

drone about it. I was impressed, he had warned me about it before the general drone population was informed. Even just walking along outside, nearly every conversation I overheard was at least mentioning it, if not dominated by it, whereas yesterday it had only been mentioned by drones sparingly. It seems Jasper knew his stuff.

I decided to not change my plans and continue to 512 Ashwood St. to seek a job. After seeing how much killing just two drones filled my mass, energy, and money reserves, I had questioned the necessity of seeking alternate ways to make money. But if what I heard in the diner was true, having a 'stable job' during the Odd Summer time period was an advantage, and there was a possibility of 'food rationing' and 'food shortages' neither of which I liked the sound of. Best to secure stable resources while I could.

My trip to Ashwood St. was less eventful than last time, but much more interesting. I noticed several of the physically modified drones (mostly combat models) wearing bands of yellow material around their upper arms, with a black symbol depicting a drone's hand imprinted on the band. Maybe a faction indicator? But this change was too swift and widespread. More likely it had something to do with Odd Summer.

The other new thing was that every now and then I would see a drone wearing a face cover, usually just a simple dark covering over the eyes. These I saw mostly around the multi-level structures near Ashwood St. and other drones gave them a wide berth.

Once, I saw a drone in full-coverings much like the Guardian loitering around an intersection. Its coverings were black with yellow highlights, and a full shell over its head. After standing around and turning its head as if looking for something it suddenly disappeared! No, wait, it just moved very very fast, I barely caught the blur of

motion as it left, out of sight in moments.

Estimated threat: High.

How it managed to move that fast was, of course, a mystery. Everything I knew about physical laws seemed to be wrong lately. If that drone attacked I wasn't sure how to counter that kind of speed. At the very least the other drones hadn't acted scared at its presence, merely curious, so hopefully it wasn't a threat I'd have to deal with.

I continued walking while pondering countermeasures, up steps and over walkways, until I finally wound up in front of 512 Ashwood St. again.

There still weren't any indicators that this building was special, or of what exactly a 'job' here might entail. But the entrance was unlocked when I pushed on the door handle.

Inside was a mostly empty room with white walls and a polished floor made of stone tiles. At the back of the room was a set of metal 'stairs' that spiraled into the level above and below. Along the back and side walls were several doors, most were closed, but one door to the right was propped open. The only other object was a large wooden counter in the middle of the room that twisted in a circle, leaving room for the one drone in the room to sit in a chair.

The drone in question was sitting with its feet up on the counter, its attention on a 'smart phone' it held. It was a physically modified drone, tough defensive scales around the neck and up the sides of the head that stopped at its short black hair, and its scaled hands sported

sharp, hooked claws that it nevertheless adeptly used to tap at the phone. Along with its natural biological modifications, it also sported many artificial modifications such as inscribed skin symbols and (shudder) metal loops embedded in its ears and nose. As it was the only drone here I walked up to ask it directions.

"Is this-"

"You look lost. The nearest high school is quite a few blocks from here. Take a right when you exit and keep walking."

...odd.

"Is this 512 Ashwood St.?"

The drone sighed, then turned its eyes to me. "Yes, this is 512 Ashwood St. What's it to you?"

"I was told I could find a job here."

"Mm hmm, and just who told you that?"

Hmm, Jasper had asked me not to tell who sent me. His goodwill was currently worth more than a possible job...

The drone sighed again. "It was that weasel Jasper right? Look brat, this isn't a babysitting service, go back to-"

"Lily? Is that a prospective hire I hear you talking to?" said a new voice that came from the open door.

'Lily' grit its teeth and answered, "No Sandra, its just a lost kid."

"Actually I am here for a job," I replied directly to the new drone. This one seemed far more amiable.

"Oh! Well then send them in Lily!"

Lily rolled its eyes and merely gestured to the room with a clawed hand before it proceeded to once again ignore me while tapping at its phone. I headed over to the open door.

Inside was a drone in one of the black/white suits. It had long black hair and wore 'spectacles' like Dr. Mason had. The table it was sitting at was covered in papers as well as an electronic screen hooked up to several other devices. Most of it looked similar to what was in the white coat's test chambers.

"Hello, please come in and have a seat. Its nice to see someone come in early on the first day, it usually takes people a few days to figure out where we are. So then, just to confirm you're here for a job position?"

"Yes, that is right," I answered.

"Splendid. Now I have a few questions I need to ask you, and a few things to inform you about. First of all, at no point during this interview are you obligated to tell me your real name or personal information. You may choose to keep those private from the company for your entire duration with us, from this opening interview all the way to retirement if you choose to stay with us. Do you understand?"

Well that's perfect for me, "Yes."

"Second point of business, were you informed of the nature of this job position?'

"No. I was only told that I could earn money."

"Oh dear, well then don't be shocked, but this is a minion position for the super villain known as Hellion. If that is a problem know that you are free to go no questions asked."

I didn't have any problem with that, however I also didn't know what any of it meant either.

"Um, I don't think I have a problem with it, but could you explain to me more about what a minion position entails?"

The drone perked up at this.

"Oh of course! Well, basically a minion acts as support for a super villain in whatever endeavor they are working on. While they fight it out on the front lines, minions work in the background and take care of all the little details to make sure the task gets done. Its not as glamorous or showy, but it is safer and you get paid. Makes sense so far?"

Seemed simple enough, "Yes."

"Good, now in the case of Hellion she runs things as a business, providing training and equipment to minions, and other villains pay her in order to utilize her minions. Of course the minions sometimes do jobs for Hellion directly. Some of these jobs are regular villain endeavors, but Hellion also controls the territory around Ashwood St. and you might be asked to help secure it or make sure everything is running smoothly. Understand all that?"

"Yes."

"Good, now before we go further there are a few things you should know. As the activities of a super villain are not strictly "legal" there is a risk of both legal consequences, and bodily harm up to and including death while on the job. Hellion tries to minimize these, and she has both doctors and lawyers on call, but there is always that risk when dealing with super powers and capes. Knowing this, is this job still something you are interested in?"

I wasn't sure why it was warning me about injury or death while on

the job. Injury and death were constant threats even without dealing with abnormal drones. Maybe these legal risks were something really bad? Either way if they were providing extra resources it was a net win for me.

"Yes, I am very much still interested in this."

"Excellent! I must say it's nice seeing the younger generation being so decisive. Oh, which reminds me, you are eighteen or older right?"

Eighteen... cycles? As in operation time? Yes, I definitely was older than eighteen cycles.

"Yes."

"Oh good, I wondered for a second since you look so young. Not skipping school are you?"

School? That was the place Lily had mentioned. I hadn't considered a young drone might be required to go somewhere. Maybe if I...

"Kidding, kidding. No worries even if you are, I won't tell," said Sandra as she winked and laughed. Ah, a 'joke'. I still wasn't able to recognize those.

After that Sandra had me read through a bunch of 'documents' and give some verbal confirmations that I understood them. Of course I

didn't understand everything, but I got the main gist of it with some context clues from Sandra. Apparently Hellion was a member of the 'super villain' faction, who were enemies of the 'super hero' faction. Sandra had me give verbal confirmation and 'check mark' a document that said that if I was a 'spy' nothing I learned was admissible in a court of law. I'm not sure why they wouldn't just try to kill a spy if they found one, but many of these drone rules made little sense to me. Like how both factions used anomalous powers, but the 'super hero' faction was a security force for the city, and would attempt to capture super villains and minions, rather than kill them. It seemed counter intuitive to me, but at least since I was working for a villain I was under no such restriction.

There were a couple more things to go through, mainly 'insurance', and setting up a 'P.O. box' where my money would be sent if I didn't pick it up, but eventually we came to an interesting document that asked if I wanted to declare a power.

"Declare a power?"

"Yes, minion work doesn't require you have one, and you don't need to declare one even if you have it, but if you want to use your power while on the job it needs to be declared. Small things like lifting boxes with super strength are fine, but if a cape tries to arrest you, you aren't allowed to use your power to try and resist arrest if you haven't declared it. That includes benedicci, and mutavus mutations as well mind you."

"Minions are restricted from using powers? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Ah, well as I mentioned the heroes will mostly try to arrest or restrain before resorting to lethal force. The problem is they can't do

that without information on their target. If they tried to go in for arrests on what they thought were normal people and someone started shooting lasers or whatever else, the next time they try they will just skip to using lethal force. This is a safety measure for the minions who don't have super powers, and breaking this rule has some hefty penalties including the withdrawal of support from Hellion. Plus if the heroes find out you took advantage of this rule they tend to throw the book at you afterwards."

"So the heroes follow these rules too?"

"Well, it's more like an unspoken rule when it comes to the heroes. We play by some rules, they don't resort to lethal force. Win/win as long as everyone plays ball."

Interesting concept, using rules to mitigate the damage of conflict. As for whether or not to declare a power I wasn't sure. Not declaring and staying hidden seemed safer, but at the same time pretending to be a minion with powers would be better for my disguise if I ever needed to use my abilities openly.

Sandra must have noticed my hesitance because she continued saying, "If you do declare a power there *are* some additional benefits, we handle any special equipment you need to utilize your power, and you get paid more in compensation for the added risk. A minion might be required to use their power to complete the job, but it will still be the villains on the front lines, you still work in the background."

"Does equipment include special nutritional requirements?"

"Absolutely."

"Then yes, I would like to declare a power."

There was only one more paper added from declaring a power. Surprisingly I didn't even need to say what kind of power it was (which made me immensely happy), only that I had one. Sandra assured me this would be explained in more detail at an 'orientation' that would take place on Saturday.

"Well then I think that's mostly everything, there's just one last thing to take care of," said Sandra, slipping me the final piece of paper. "Since we don't use real names professionally you'll need a call-sign we can use for you."

"A call-sign?"

"Oh it can be anything. An old nick-name, a nonsense word, something that's important to you or means something to you. It's pretty popular to use your future super villain name among the newbies, since a lot of minions go on to become independent later. Choose whatever you like and I'll go get you a mask while you decide."

A name I get to choose? And it can be anything? Interesting. I considered it a little before writing down the word for my favorite thing, luckily I knew the spelling for it.

Sandra came back with a plain brown box in one hand. I handed her the paper and when she read it she smiled before opening the box and handing it to me. Inside was an artificial head shell, or 'mask' I guess is the term. It was made of a hard, bone-white material that would cover the entire head, with two holes for the eyes covered in translucent material darkened to black. The only other feature was the seams that allowed it to adjust and conform to the size of the wearer.

"Well then *Tofu*," said Sandra, "it's my pleasure to welcome you to Hellion's Henchmen."

Ch10 Cafeteria Cuisine

Sandra showed me how to use the mask. Despite being a rigid shell it was adjustable with some controls on the inside of the face plate. Pressing a few buttons in combination allowed for adjustments to be made, while locking it in the preferred shape otherwise. Technically I could just adjust my own head to the mask, but I appreciated the well-done design. After making sure I could adjust the mask myself, Sandra showed me how the mask could collapse into a portable form that made it easy to carry. As a bonus it could even receive messages that would alert me to when and where a job was happening that I needed to get to (and it received messages with no physical medium! Astounding!).

Sandra told me that the mask would display the time and location of the orientation on Saturday, and sent me on my way. I tucked the mask under my 'shirt' and left, passing by a preoccupied Lily on the way out.

Now I just needed to map more of the area, and maybe figure out when Saturday is. I had already figured out that they had a set of named days on a rotating schedule (such an odd system, why the names?), I just didn't know what the order of the days was.

For now I decided to just stick to mapping more of the area. That way when they sent the signal to my mask I'd know where to go. I'd start with this 'school' I heard so many drones mention. It seemed important.

I headed right as I left the building, following Lily's instructions. If I

was properly mapping my surroundings then I was currently heading 'west' along Ashwood St. To the 'north' of the area near 512 was Maggie's diner and the tunnel entrance, and everything was still located in just the section of the city labeled E13. I had to hand it to the drones, if nothing else, they knew how to build big.

Ashwood St. continued for a long time. The numbers on the buildings counted down gradually (a few were on the other side of the street for some reason), and when I reached building 012 I found a massive structure, the width of two 'blocks' and ten levels high, the entire thing built with obvious reinforcements done to the support structures. I might have thought it was some kind of protective structure for resources if it weren't for the symbols by the entrance that declared the building to be "Clement High School."

Neat. So this was the place where young drones came from? Or maybe it was just the training facility? I was curious at what kinds of tests drones had to go through. A place this large probably contained thousands of drone young, getting yellow-furs or brown-furs for all of them to fight didn't seem cost-effective. Although maybe they fought them in groups, the drones did indeed value teamwork and doubling up would lower the costs substantially. Plus, the non-combat drones probably didn't need to participate in the combat tests.

I wandered over to the main entrance while I pondered these questions. A decision that turned out to be a mistake.

"Hey kid, what do you think you're doing out here!?"

Oops.

I turned to the sound of the voice and found what was an obvious security drone, although I didn't recognize the outfit. Probably belonged specifically to the school. It walked up to me and glared, its mouth turned down in a deep frown.

No weapon detected.

Estimated threat: minimum.

"Trying to skip huh? You can't even wait a few more days? School's almost out anyways."

"Um, I'm not assigned to a school. I don't go here."

"Uh-huh. Sure. Well then just show me your I.D. and you can be on your way then."

I of course didn't have my own I.D. Most likely that was the 'identification card' that I had found on the drones I ate. Technically I still had those I.D.'s but they were useless to me right now. I'd have to see about finding a solution to this later, if I managed to extract myself from this situation.

"I forgot my I.D."

"Well then I can't let you leave now can I. Come on, you'll wait in the office for now, and none of your back-talk. Dunno why you seniors always try to ditch before lunch even starts. If you want to leave

campus for lunch just wait until it starts and then present your I.D. I don't care if you graduate in a few more days, until then you follow the rules."

Wait...lunch?

I happily followed the security guard into the building. It led me down several corridors and then left me at a seating area in the 'office', warning me not to leave before the bell rang before it walked away, grumbling under its breath the whole time. Several drones went by, all seemingly very busy with 'paperwork', although most seemed to be using flat screens rather than paper. One drone did ask why I was waiting in the office, but telling it I was told to wait for the bell seemed to appease it. I waited patiently in the office, counting the seconds. I was looking forward to tasting the 'senior' food.

Eventually an alarm rang out which surprised me, but this must have been the bell the guard spoke of because none of the drones reacted badly. I decided to ask a drone for directions, I didn't want to get lost in such a large structure. The one I talked to gave me an odd look, but pointed me in the direction of a 'cafeteria'.

As I walked I quickly noticed the drone young. They were mostly smaller than the adult drones, and I slow~ly adjusted my height to be more around the average. I'd return it to something more comfortable later.

From the flow of the crowd I quickly narrowed in on the cafeteria. Apparently it was just a very large room with enough tables for the drones to sit. Not surprising considering the shear amount of drones. I had seen a few young drones out in the city, but these were

normally very small young with a caretaker. I had yet to see where they made new drones, although it was probably unlikely that I ever would. If there was a progenitor for the drones somewhere it would obviously be heavily guarded.

On one wall of the cafeteria was a side room where a line was forming. I quickly entered the line as well, shuffling forward slowly with the rest of them. While I waited I observed the young drones at the tables, it was really useful to see so many interactions at once. One oddity I noticed was that the young drones tended to cluster with other similar drones. Especially in the case of the combat drones. Those ones almost exclusively stuck together in groups with other modified drones, and regular drones avoided them. This was more like the behavior in central, the drones around Ashwood and Maggie's diner hadn't really seemed to care, but the ones in central definitely had. I resolved to be extra careful about the social hierarchy at play here. I just wanted to get my food and get out.

The line moved forward slowly but surely, and I was pulled from my observations by the large drone at the line's terminus which was overseeing transactions. It took the I.D. from the drone in front of me and and swiped it into a device that beeped before giving it back. Then it was my turn, and I didn't have an I.D.!

"Um, I forgot my I.D. today."

"Then it's two dollars," it replied, obviously bored.

I didn't have two dollars. I had **a** dollar and ten 'cents'.

"Um..."

"Here, use mine," came a voice behind me.

I turned to the young drone that had spoken. It was tall with pale skin, and had long, somewhat oily looking, black hair. In its hand it held its I.D. which it was offering to me.

"It's okay for me to use yours?" I asked.

"Yeah sure, the school's closing on Friday anyway."

I gratefully took the I.D. from the young drone and tried to hand it to the overseer.

"You aren't supposed to share those," it said.

"Aw come on Ms. B. They are already cutting two weeks off of school. I had the month pass." replied the young drone.

The overseer grunted and swiped the I.D. twice before handing it back to the young drone and waving us forward.

"Thanks Ms. B, you're the best," said the young drone.

Ms. B merely rolled its eyes and grunted.

The young drone and I retreated, quickly following the line again but with the young drone in the lead. I copied it in taking a tray and eating utensils, before taking small cups and platters of food to go on the tray. The food was... odd-looking. Mostly cut into the little squares and rectangles that drones enjoyed, the food came in muted colors, and seemed to favor a soggy texture. A taste test would be the deciding factor. Speaking of which I needed to secure a seating arrangement.

"Thanks again for helping me."

"No worries man. Ms. B is gruff but she rarely makes a fuss of it. My name is Mikey by the way."

"Mine is Tofu."

"Tofu? For real?"

"No. That is what others call me."

"Ha, no worries, I've heard weirder nick names. Come on, I see my friend from here. You're new right? You can sit with us."

"Um, yes, how could you tell?"

"You've still got that first day look. Bad timing dude, you just got here and they are closing it down early."

I really didn't like how easily some drones picked up on these small details. At least being 'new' was not suspicious enough to raise alarms in this case.

It led me over to a table where a few other drones were seated and placed its tray down next to a short drone with curly red hair and spectacles before addressing it.

"Hey Tim, what's up?"

"Jennifer Heartly triggered," responded the short drone while poking at its food with a plastic utensil.

"Yeah dude I *know*. It's been all over the school all day, how could I not?"

"The odds of gaining a super power are over one in a million."

What was that now? *Gaining* super powers?

"Okay, here we go again," said Mikey. It specifically caught my gaze and rolled its eyes.

"One in a million, but those numbers spike during odd summer. Some studies have shown it can get up to one in a thousand depending on the situation," said Tim.

"That's a rough estimate, of a possible high, on a *single* report done by quacks Tim."

"There's about five thousand students at this school. So technically by the end of Odd Summer at least five people in this school will trigger. And one already has."

"Tim, even with those odds that's like, less than a point one percent chance that you get powers. That any of us get powers. Heck, maybe some other school will get nine and we don't get even one more."

"So why did it have to be *Jennifer*?! She's a *jerk*!" exclaimed Tim.

"Ha, I can think of a few better words to describe her than that. A-word, B-word, C-word, I could probably make it down most of the alphabet if I really tried for it."

That got a snort out of Tim, and the two of them carried the conversation to different topics. I myself turned back to the food I had paused in eating to listen to the little drone's information. It had been quite informative.

I started to sample the different items on my tray... and was quickly disappointed. It was decently nutrient rich, but not by much more than the old nutrient slurry had been, and the taste was substandard at best. I asked what some of the items were, and found it hard to believe when Mikey and Tim listed food names also served at Maggie's diner. Apparently the same item could come in multiple different qualities.

"Yeah it's pretty bad. You should see what they try to pass off as meat. I swear the last time I poked a cafeteria "steak" it triggered and tried to fly away," said Mikey.

We talked about different subjects for a while when eventually the bell rang again. Lunch was now over.

"So which class do you have next then?" asked Mikey.

"Oh, um, I don't have a next class."

"Lunch dismissal? You know Bradly won't let you go early without your I.D." said Tim.

"Is he the semi-bald security guard?"

"Yup that's him. He's a real stickler for that stuff. You could have the office call your parents I think."

Hmm, that wasn't an option. I don't have 'parents', whatever those are. And informing the overseers that there was an unaccounted for drone didn't seem wise.

"Um, calling my parents isn't really an option."

"Eh, then it looks like you're stuck here mate," said Mikey. "Come on, you can follow me. My next teacher Mr. Kimber never takes roll, and the last period is just going to be Odd Summer announcements anyways."

Tim and Mikey split up partway outside the cafeteria. I followed Mikey who led me up a few floors to a room filled with small table/chair combination furniture. Mikey led me to the back of the room and sat in one of the chairs, and I followed suit sitting next to him. Drones slowly filled the desks, however it did not seem like I was displacing anyone, as by the time the bell rang there were still a few empty desks.

The bell rang and a large, fat drone with spectacles looked up from where it had been reading a screen. From its seat it addressed the class, "Bit of a change today. We will be going over the history of several important cities in relation to Odd Summer."

It proceeded to turn on a large flat screen at the front of the classroom. On the screen was displayed a map which, when I compared it to the subway map, I realized was of Fortress City. Using a small device which was emitting a red beam of light, the drone swiveled its chair to face the screen and began to lecture for the next hour.

And what an informative hour it was.

The lesson from the 'teacher' covered a brief mention of many cities, but it focused on three in particular. One was Area 52, a city based in a region known as Death Valley. The only reason it existed was because in the area the city was located there was so little wildlife that it became easier to deal with the resulting anomalies that Odd Summer brought.

Another city was Hive City (what a redundant name), which was based in the Bread Basket region. It was ruled over by a mutated animal, which had struck a deal with the United States government at the time. In exchange for maintaining the food supply to the rest of the United States, the mutant animal was protected instead of destroyed by the country.

The final one was known as New York City. Unlike the other cities it had been founded well before the first Odd Summer (so why was it called new?), and the reason for its continued survival was that every Odd Summer it became enveloped in a thick fog that protected the city. Every time the event happened it merely enveloped itself in fog and at the end emerged unharmed, its citizens missing the memories of the intervening time. No one knew where the fog came from, and Mikey whispered to me that it was rumored the city itself had triggered during the first Odd Summer.

Unfortunately the city I wanted to know most about, Fortress City, was mentioned only briefly at the beginning. Founded on the California coast by the Architect after the fifth Odd Summer. The only reason the teacher even mentioned it was because the Architect

had apparently negotiated the deal with Hive City's ruler. I guess Fortress City's history must have been covered in previous lectures.

The bell eventually rang and I followed Mikey once more, this time to a very large room with metal 'bleachers' to provide communal seating. We spotted Tim in the crowd and made our way over to where he was sitting.

Again I noticed the same clustering I had witnessed in the cafeteria, with the 'students' arranging themselves into groups. Besides the obvious segregation of the combat drones I also noticed a secondary split, this one among drones that were referred to by 'he', or 'him', and drones referred to by 'she' or 'her'. It wasn't a complete split, but it was enough to **finally** identify the factor that determined which was which. Surprisingly it turned out to be a difference in their organic design code. I had finally gathered enough ambient samples to link the code pattern to the speech patterns. It didn't really seem to be an important difference, especially not when compared to some of the more heavily modified design codes I had come across, but I noted the distinction for future interactions. It would definitely help my disguise.

The bell eventually rang and the students settled down, quieting (with some prompting) to let a drone on a raised platform speak. After introducing itself it spoke about the the fact that Odd Summer was starting (several students around me whispered "no duh" at this) and began to recite a list of safety tips and announcements.

Don't go out after dark.

Avoid anyone wearing a mask if you don't recognize them as a hero.

If you must go somewhere, do so in groups.

Report anything suspicious to central, and DO NOT clog up the lines with frivolous reports or jokes.

If you have physical modifications wear your armbands (several combat drones grumbled about this, and regular drones stared at them).

If you see anything abnormal, run first before reporting.

If you do trigger, you must report it to central as soon as safely possible ("Yeah right" muttered Mikey in response).

The locations of various shelters and their lock-down procedures.

And how to get graduation and 'GPA' information if your parents decided to withdraw you from school even earlier.

I was somewhat confused by the items on the list. Several seemed completely useless (why would darkness matter? Danger was constant despite the light level) and some were so obvious I wondered why it would even mention them. At the very least the shelter information was useful, and they displayed the pictures of three heroes that operate in E13. Magenta, Brick, and the super-fast drone I had seen who went by the name Turbo. I made sure to

memorize their appearances for later.

I loved knowing who an enemy was in advance.

The assembly slowly wound down, and they dismissed the students as the bell rang.

"Welp, that's another day down the drain. Feels so great knowing I've only got a few more of these," said Mikey.

"I dunno, I think the schools are closing too early. Makes all the graduation and college stuff a hassle," replied Tim.

"Hey, at least you aren't Tofu here. Transferred in right before school ends, what luck is that? Are you also graduating this year Tofu? Or do you have one more?"

"Um, I won't be coming back. I have a job I signed up for."

"Already? Nice. I usually get one during the summer too," replied Mikey.

We walked out of the school and I just aimlessly followed Mikey and Tim, letting them do most of the talking. We headed north from the school and kept to the third level walkways until Tim eventually

separated, heading to one of the higher levels. Mikey turned to me.

"So you live farther on or...?"

"Yes, I live near Maggie's Sunrise Diner, on Mintholly St."

"Oh dang, that's quite a walk still. At least you won't have to do it more than a few times."

We continued on until we finally reached Mikey's home. He lived in a fourth floor apartment that had a convenient stairway to get to. As we approached I heard shouting from above, normally I ignored this type of shouting since it was rather commonplace, however Mikey looked up, frowned, and muttered a bit before turning to me.

"This is my stop. It was nice meeting you Tofu."

"It was nice to meet you as well. Thank you again for the loan of your I.D."

"No problem at all man. See you tomorrow then?"

Hmm that depends.

"Um, maybe. I might need to go to my job."

"They making you start right away? Harsh. Anyways later on man."

"Later."

I considered what I had learned today. It was definitely worth going back for more information, I had learned a lot in only a few hours, and the risk seemed surprisingly small. If I wasn't sent the signal to go to the orientation I would definitely try to sneak in again.

But jeez that food sucked.

Ch11 Bitter Pill

I kept exploring after I separated from Mikey, mainly just testing if I could navigate from his house to Maggie's diner without needing to backtrack. Luckily it seems like even in the most confusing areas the streets still follow a set pattern. The map that Mr. Kimber displayed helped me here. The city was almost perfectly round, with some streets forming straight lines from the center to the outer edges, and the rest of the streets forming concentric rings around the center. Using this information I was easily able to navigate back to the tunnel entrance.

I spent the rest of the afternoon hunting rats to test my new mask. I would most likely have to fight while wearing it and I wanted to make sure it didn't impede me.

I put the mask on and adjusted it to the size of my head. It fit quite snugly, even when I changed the shape of my head while wearing it.

Once adjusted I began checking my senses. Sight, smell, hearing, none of them were severely impacted which surprised me. Outwardly it didn't really look like it was doing much, but in order to not hinder smelling and hearing while being form fitting it obviously had to be more complicated on the inside. I would like to open it up and see the inner workings, but Sandra had warned me to not try to modify it. Plus I was doubtful I understood enough to put it back together. My specialty was organic components, not inorganic ones.

I made sure the helmet was properly in place and then began stalking the tunnels to look for rats. I started where I destroyed the nest last time and went from there. Quickly I found a fresh trail and followed it.

Searching the tunnels for a while I eventually found a new group of rats. This time it was a group of six big ones without any of the tiny ones. They were currently jumping out of a pipe in the ceiling, most of them with small parcels in their mouths. Maybe this was a scavenging party.

I charged around the corner using the same strategy as last time. As long as I didn't perform worse than last time I would consider it a successful test of fighting with the mask on.

Reaching the first one I stabbed it in the back of the neck with my knife. The second one I slashed its neck artery, and gave it a good kick to daze it while it bled out. Surprisingly the rest didn't run like last time, and dropped their parcels to charge me.

For all the good it did them.

The third rat reached me and I stomped its head, using my traction claws to get a good grip and grind its face into the floor. When the fourth came close I flung the third rat's corpse at it, knocking it away.

From that point forth the fight became a dodging test. They would leap or charge and try to grapple me, while I dodged and used my height and weight advantage to rain blows on them. I had to say, while the drone form wasn't very combat specialized, being upright and tall was still a great advantage versus crawling foes. As long as I wasn't tripped I could put most of my weight behind the blows.

Eventually four rats laid dead or dying around me. The two survivors tried a last resort and one charged my feet while the other leaped. I kicked the one that went for my feet away, but the second landed on my upper torso and tried to bite at my face. It went for my eyes, but apparently it was too stupid to realize I was wearing a shell and instead its teeth scrapped uselessly at the mask. I grabbed it around the middle and squeezed, increasing the pressure until its spine finally snapped.

Dropping it to the floor I readied myself for the last one, but I needn't have bothered. It was running far down the tunnel and ducked behind the next intersection as I watched.

Well then, the mask definitely helped this time. But even if the rat hadn't attacked my face the mask hadn't hindered my normal fighting methods at all. I'd say this was a successful test run of the mask.

After testing the mask I decided to hibernate for the night. Technically I could continue to scout the surrounding areas, but I was worried about what the drone at the school had said about being out after dark. There just had to be a real reason for why it would mention that, and if the rest of the drones were following that advice I would need to follow it too just to not stand out.

And I suppose I needed to rest Human.exe as well. I knew I could push it but there was no real pressing need to.

I scouted buildings for most of the morning, climbing up walkways and staircases to see how the area looked from up high. With one building I used the metal bar staircase to reach the roof, and as I looked out over the city I saw buildings spreading out around me far into the distance. In the area around Maggie's they were only a few levels tall, but in the direction of Ashwood St. they created the illusion of a sloping hill as they gradually increased in size. Looking in the direction of central I could almost make out the tops of the mega structures that dominated that area. A massive panorama.

I had to be wrong about the shape of this place. The ceiling wasn't a ceiling. But I didn't know what else it could be. I didn't have enough information to even make an informed guess.

But I knew one place where I could find out more.

I made my way back to Clemont High School. If I was timing it right I should have about half an hour before lunch, and I used a higher walkway to scout the school without drawing the attention of the security guards. The main entrance to the school was a wide bridge that connected to the level three 'road' walkway that made up the majority of Ashwood St. however other smaller bridges extended to other walkways around the surrounding buildings.

I spotted the security guard that had apprehended me last time. Getting caught by it again would probably not end as harmlessly as last time. It was a 'stickler' for the rules if Tim and Mikey were to be believed.

I decided to sneak in a little after the bell rang for lunch, walking to one of the walkways that was one level above a side bridge. When a guard walked passed on the bridge I waited until it was a good distance away before I jumped down onto the bridge behind it, and soundlessly entered the single door that led inside.

Inside was a corridor, and students were filtering out of the classrooms to go to the cafeteria. I quickly fell into place with the crowd. One or two young drones had seen me enter, but like I had noted yesterday the student drones basically ignored one another unless they were part of the same social group, and I continued along unquestioned by them.

The pattern from yesterday held, and the cafeteria was again a mass of young drones waiting in line for food. Curiously I noticed that there were slightly fewer drones here today. Enough to be noticable. I suppose that many 'parents' had decided to withdraw them early after yesterday's announcements. While waiting in line I spotted Mikey and Tim already at a table. Luckily between a quarter held by one of the rats from yesterday, and keeping a look out for loose coins this morning, I had managed to scrape together the necessary two dollars.

Today's lunch was supposedly fried veggies with a fruit cup and beans on the side, but I wasn't sure how much I believed them. I had seen fried veggies at Maggie's and I don't think they were supposed to *leak*.

Tasted fine this time at least.

I made my way over to Tim and Mikey. Strangely neither of them was eating, and Mikey was sitting with his head in his hands.

"Hello, may I sit with you again?"

Tim looked up at me, "Oh! Hey Tofu. Yeah, go for it man."

"Thank you."

I took a seat and started eating, but quickly I realized something was wrong with Mikey. He wasn't talking or eating, when yesterday he had kept the conversation going with Tim rather effortlessly. Tim also looked like something was bothering him, altough it seemed more like he was worried about Mikey. I ate in silence for a bit, and eventually Tim tried to converse with Mikey.

"Hey Mikey, we'll figure out something man. No worries," said Tim. Even to me his reassurance sounded hesitant, and I decided to inquire.

"Did something bad happen?"

Tim looked over to me and was about to say something but hesitated, looking first to Mikey.

"My mother's scumbag boyfriend happened," replied Mikey.

Boyfriend? Scumbag? Those were new terms I didn't recognize. 'Boy'

and 'friend' I knew, and I had thought friend was a good term, I guess 'scumbag' invalidates the positive connotation? At least 'friend' implied the problem was a "who" and not a "what."

"What did they do?" I asked.

Tim waited for Mikey, but when Mikey stayed silent he answered, "He stole the money that Mikey was saving for college."

'College'. From what I had heard from the announcements yesterday and other students it was the next level of training after high school. Students needed to pay to be trained at this level then?

"...all six thousand of it," whispered Mikey, so quiet I almost couldn't hear him.

Six. Thousand.

> Estimated worth = 600 cycles of operation minimum. Continuous.

I reeled at Mikey's statement. Six thousand dollars! You could buy so much food with that! I hadn't even realized it was possible to get that much money.

"H-how did you get that much?"

"He's been working every summer since the last odd one," Tim answered.

"And now it's all down the drain," said Mikey.

Well at least I now knew that a job paid well. Sandra had said that the minion job paid by every task done, but hadn't given a hard amount.

"Is there no way to get the money back?" I asked.

"No, scumbag already used it to pay off his dealer. My mom was fighting with him about it yesterday but..." at this Mikey grit his teeth and clenched his fists before continuing, "I'd almost consider it money well spent if it would just get him the hell out of my life. But he's like a leech. Sucking the life out of my mom, and now me too."

It was then that the bell rang, and Mikey got up to go, leaving his tray of food behind (he had been too distraught to eat!).

"We'll think of something Mikey. Promise!"

"Thanks Tim..." Mikey replied, but he didn't seem very enthusiastic about it. As he walked away I turned to Tim.

"How damaging is this for his plans?"

Tim looked at me and replied, "It would have paid for the first semester at least. His grades are fine, but he didn't get any scholarships. Plus the nearest college is still an hour away even with the subway. He was hoping to rent and maybe work part time. Now though... anyways I'll see you later Tofu, I need to get to class."

Tim walked away with his shoulders down.

I pondered the situation as I ate the rest of Mikey's lunch. Technically this whole thing wasn't my problem. My main concern was securing steady nutrition and resources without compromising my disguise.

But that didn't really feel right to me.

I had not been anyone important to Mikey, and yet he had still fed me for free (two times now). If possible I'd like to maintain valuable drones like that. Who knows where else I would find someone willing to feed me for free?

Mikey had said that the money was probably not recoverable. But he also said he would settle for getting rid of the 'scumbag boyfriend'.

Maybe I could help with that.

I spent the next two 'periods' in Mr. Kimber's class, listening to a *fascinating* lecture on post Odd Summer supply routes. I was somewhat distracted by Mikey's situation however. Rather than slowly take notes like he had yesterday, today he just stared at his desk. Disregarding knowledge and not eating. Definitely distraught.

When the bell rang I went to the 'restroom', and changed my face in the stall to attend Mr. Kimber's class again. While listening to the supply route lecture a second time (repeated verbatim, obviously Mr. Kimber is a practiced professional), I calculated the risk of getting rid of the scumbag boyfriend. It was a bit more risky than the two ambushers, those had most likely been working only with each other. But the scumbag boyfriend was apparently subservient to this 'dealer', and its absence might be missed. Plus, I didn't know how much it would take for 'cops' or super heroes to get involved.

As a back-up plan maybe it would be possible for Mikey to get the money from an alternate source. Gathering coins off the floor had worked for me so far, although I wasn't sure if Mikey could gather as efficiently as I could. It depended on how long Odd Summer lasted, and on how long it took before the colleges started to function afterwards. I'd think of something. For now I planned to follow Mikey home again. This time I would take note of the exact residence and come back while Mikey was in school to get rid of the 'leech'.

I just needed to make sure I killed the 'scumbag boyfriend' and not the 'mom'. But I doubted that would be too hard to figure out.

The bell rang and I hurried to the restroom stall to change my face back. I needed to catch up to Mikey and Tim before they left.

I reached the entrance bridge before they did and greeted them. Tim was a bit surprised I had stayed past lunch again, but I made up an excuse about having lost my I.D. and it not being worth the hassle of replacing since school was almost over anyways.

On the way home Tim did his best to try and come up with a solution. Mikey tried to go along with it, but it was obvious he didn't really believe the offered suggestions would work. When Tim left to follow his own route home his brow was still furrowed with trying to come up with a solution.

Mikey and I walked along in silence after that. Blocks passed by while Mikey just walked along staring at the floor. As we reached the stairs that led up to his place Mikey hesitantly turned to me.

"Hey Tofu, um, do you think that maybe, uh, that maybe your job has any more openings? I-I feel bad asking right after meeting you, but um... I don't know what else to do."

Hmm, I had considered that option, but being a minion had struck me as rather dangerous for a normal drone. Plus I wasn't sure if I wanted Mikey to know what I was doing.

"I'm not sure if they have spots open, and I should warn you the job is kinda risky. Want me to ask if they are hiring more?"

"R-really?! Yes! Yes please! I'll do anything dude. I really need to make money right now, and people almost never hire during Odd Summer. Tha-"

"Hey ther shquirt! How wash school?" said a garbled voice. Mikey's face instantly went from smiling back to the frown from earlier, with added signs of anger detectable as well. Clenching his fists and gritting his teeth, he turned to the approaching drone that had spoken. It was an older drone wearing long leg covers and a brown 'jacket' on its torso. It seemed to be wavering as it walked, and it approached the two of us slowly, seeming to put extra thought into each step. In one of its hands it held a brown paper bag with a glass bottle inside.

Estimated threat: negligible.

When it reached us it spoke again, "You tykes learn anythin' new today?" and it place a hand on Mikey's head to ruffle his hair. Mikey immediately smacked the hand away.

"Aw, don't be that way shquirt. You shtill mad about yesterday? I told ya, I'll pay ya back. Here, I even had a good day today."

At this the drone reached into a pocket and pulled out a single crumpled paper rectangle, the symbol "20" imprinted on it. He offered it to Mikey, but Mikey didn't move, just stared at the ground with his fists clenched. Eventually the drone gave up and just tossed the paper at Mikey's torso.

"Jeez shquirt, you're such a sour pussh. You won't make any friendsh that way y'know," said the drone. Then it turned to walk away.

Mikey didn't make a move, so I bent and grabbed the crumpled paper, flattening it out as I did so.

Yep, the symbols on the paper represented just twenty dollars. Not two thousand or even two hundred. Just twenty. Not even close to the six thousand it owed Mikey.

Mikey was red with anger, his limbs quivering, I was honestly surprised he hadn't attacked the drone yet. Was the risk of repercussion from attacking the older drone just too high for a young drone to act?

Oh well, I owed Mikey for the lunches anyway. Just needed to confirm with him.

"Hey Mikey, I'm pretty sure it is, but just to make sure I don't have it wrong, this is the 'scumbag boyfriend' you were talking about right?"

Mikey stirred at my words, his eyes rising to meet mine with confusion.

"What the hell'd you shay?!" asked the drone as it whirled back at us. Not quite as unsteady as it was at first glance.

Estimated threat: minimum;

"I'm asking if you're the scumbag boyfriend who stole money from

Mikey. I wouldn't want to get it wrong."

Mikey was staring at me in disbelief, eyes wide, and the older drone's face was quickly becoming angry and red, much like Mikey's had been. But this drone didn't have Mikey's patience, and it swung at me with the bottle. I suppose that was as good a confirmation as any.

Its limb moved in a wide arc. While it may have had some force behind it, it was still a really clumsy swing, and I caught it with my right hand. It barely even made my arm budge.

It blinked at me stupidly, obviously it hadn't expected that to happen, and I took advantage of its confusion to grab its throat in my other hand and squeeze. It dropped the bottle in its flailing, and with both hands tried to claw at my arm to dislodge it. I used my now free right hand to pull out my knife, which caused the drone to scrabble harder.

"T-T-Tofu! What in the world are you doing!?" said Mikey.

Wasn't it obvious?

"Well you said you would be fine with the lost money if he would at least disappear. I'm doing that."

"DUDE! I-I didn't mean. You can't just stab a person in broad daylight!" Mikey exclaimed.

Ah, now I understood. I scanned the area. We were the only drones around right now, but Mikey had a point. The place was rather open, and there might be unseen witnesses. I wasn't in any hurry this time around, so it was better to take my time and take care of all the details. I started to drag the scumbag boyfriend to the dark alley next to Mikey's building. It was the kind that had a space to let you see to the floors below, with a shoulder high fence to keep drones from falling.

I'd been eating really well the past few days, between the rats and drone food, so at this point I was quite a bit denser than my size would suggest. With the extra muscle and weight behind my movements I easily pulled the drone into the alley, Mikey a few steps behind me. The drone I was holding redoubled its efforts to get away and started to make strange sounds.

"Hey. Tofu. Look, I appreciate it man. Really! But the C's will be all over you if you do this. Like, its a really bad idea and uh... and..."

Mikey trailed off and stared at the drone. I followed his gaze and found that the drone had given up trying to pry me free. Instead it was holding out something it had pulled from a pocket. A rolled up bundle of paper.

A bundle of money bills.

Ah, seems it hadn't used the money after all? I let go of its throat and let it fall to the ground. It gasped and wheezed as its face slowly regained its normal color. It had been taking on an interesting bluish tint.

Mikey walked over and grabbed the money bundle. Quickly checking through it.

"Three thousand," he said at last. "You still had THREE THOUSAND!?"

Suddenly he lashed out with a foot. Kicking the drone in the side. Were we killing it or not?

"DID YOU EVEN HAVE A DEBT?! OR WERE YOU JUST STEALING MY MONEY?! YOU LAZY!" **kick** "GOOD FOR NOTHING!" **kick** "DRUNK! JUNKIE!" **kick kick**.

Wow, I didn't know drones could get this angry. Even if it wasn't very efficient, the sheer rage was intimidating.

Mikey finally stopped kicking him and backed away, heaving for breath as he collected himself. I waited until he seemed calm again before I spoke.

"So, what do you want to do with him?"

Mikey gulped a little more air and responded, "I just-" **huff** "I just want him out of my life."

"Understood."

I bent over the drone and picked him up by the front of his shirt cover before I started to drag him over to the fence. There was a hole in the metal mesh where it only rose to the height of my waist. The drone immediately started to protest.

"Wait, wait! Don't! Don't do this! Shquir- I mean, Michael! Michael don't let him do this! Please! I can pay you back! Honest I can!"

I looked out over the barrier to the layers below and then hauled him up, leaning him out over the drop. It kept begging, water beginning to leak from its eyes.

"Please! I can, I can-"

"Six thousand."

"Wh- what?"

"Six thousand dollars. Pay it back or the next time I see you I take the cost from your hide."

"S-six? But I, but I didn't use-"

I gave him a shake and he shut up, whimpering.

"You have until the end of Odd Summer."

Then I dropped him.

...right onto the lid of a giant trash receptacle one level down. I'd tested the plastic the lids were made of during my previous explorations. It was flexible enough to let him live from the fall. Probably. I didn't really care, but Mikey seemed to for some reason.

I turned back to Mikey who was staring at the money in his hands, not saying a word.

I spoke up, "Is it enough for college?"

"...not really. It was almost enough before, but now... businesses buckle down during Odd Summer. Almost nobody hires, and if they do they won't pay enough."

Hmm.

"Well, I know someone who is."

We entered through the front door, still open despite how late in the day it had gotten. We approached the scaled drone sitting at the single piece of furniture in the room. It looked up after an almost solid minute of tapping at its phone and sighed in irritation when it saw us.

"Tch, goddamn it all, SANDRA! THEY'RE MULTIPLYING!"

Ch12 First Come, First Served

Mikey got signed up to be a minion without any problems, even though he was hesitant at first. He had tried to explain to me how the super heroes were the 'good guys' and the super villains were the 'bad guys', but I hadn't really understood the reasoning. I had thought maybe that meant the super heroes won engagements more often, but even Mikey admitted that it was probably more like half and half, if not in the villains favor. I think it was that fact that made him finally follow me to the recruiting office on Ashwood St.

That and the money. Sandra assured the both of us that as long as a job was completed to satisfaction the reward was well worth the effort. Once she heard about Mikey's situation she estimated that he could easily make up the money by the end of the summer with a few big jobs, or just a bunch of little ones. Technically Hellion also paid a 'living wage' but that was only for permanent employees and we had to get past the 'trial phase' before that was 'on the table'. Either way, she assured Mikey that he could 'hench' for the summer and leave afterwards no questions asked if that was what he wanted.

Once we were done we left for Mikey's home again, Mikey with his new black face-mask in his possession. Unlike mine which protected the entire head, his mask only covered the upper portion of his face, and was just for protecting his 'identity', a concept that I found... humorous, once I understood it. Apparently the masks were more a form of social protection than physical, both for villains *and* heroes. It surprised me to know that all of them were doing the exact same thing I was, albeit for a slightly different reason. I was starting to understand what Jasper meant by 'guarding our secrets more than our lives.'

Mikey also warned me not to tell Tim about the henching job. Apparently Tim was a 'super hero fanboy' and 'dreamed' about getting a power so he could become a superhero. I found that very strange, especially since Tim was always quoting odds and statistics. He should understand that being a hero was the more dangerous option.

The next few days settled into a steady rhythm. Wake up and explore the city in the morning. Go to the school for lunch and Mr. Kimber's informative lectures. In the afternoon 'hang out' with Mikey and Tim, and finally hunt rats until it was time to hibernate for the night.

It was... relatively peaceful, and I learned a lot of new things (the ordering of the days being among them).

But eventually things came to an end when Friday 'rolled around'. I ate lunch with Mikey and Tim in the cafeteria, thanked Mr. Kimber for his teachings after sixth period, and walked home with Mikey and Tim once school let out. I didn't go rat hunting this time, instead doing a general systems check.

I was currently about a little over twice as dense as a normal drone my size. I had traction claws hidden in my 'shoes', and my arm bones and muscles were modified to allow for rapid extension, both for surprise attacks and for mobility. My core was hidden in a protective shell made from scraps of metal. I still had my knife, kept sharp with micro unit repairs. I had various bits of loose change hidden in different spots, and finally my mask.

Mass: 135% norm.

Energy reserves: 10 cycles continuous.

Yup, I was ready for tomorrow.

I woke up a little before dawn. The mask had beeped which had triggered my awakening, and I checked the display.

:514 Ashwood St. 9:00am. Bring Mask. Wear Something To Move In.

I left the tunnel, and headed towards Ashwood St. Technically I still had time, but I also didn't have anything else to do. I hadn't gathered enough money to get breakfast at Maggie's and I didn't want to get caught up in rat hunting right now.

The areas near Ashwood St became active quickly as the sun rose. I wandered around the 'store' windows looking inside them. Figuring out that they weren't all food dispensaries had been a big disappointment the first time I came here. The worst was when a place selling 'candles' had smelled delicious, but hadn't had anything of nutritional value when I went in to check.

By my count it was eight thirty, and I decided to just head for the designated location. Being a bit early was better than a bit late, and the message had only said nine a.m.

514 Ashwood St. turned out to be a... clothing store? It was right next to 512 as well, not the most subtle considering this was supposed to be a secret location.

I entered the store and looked around. All of the coverings on display were large, padded jackets meant for cold weather. Odd.

"There are changing rooms in the back if you want to try something on," said a bored looking drone behind the counter. Then it went back to reading its 'magazine'.

My mask was currently in a torso pouch, and I checked the message displayed on it again. Yup, 514 Ashwood St. This was the correct location, maybe the orientation just hadn't started yet?

I browsed the store for a while, it really did just sell jackets. I was beginning to worry when another drone walked in. This one wore blue leg coverings and had a red shirt on its torso.

"There are changing rooms in the back if you want to try something on," said the drone behind the counter.

In the exact same tone it had used before.

The new drone ignored it completely and headed straight for the changing rooms. It entered one (without bringing a jacket to try) and

then stayed there.

And stayed.

And stayed even longer. It never came back out.

Very odd.

Something was suspicious with these changing rooms. I tried to ask the drone by the counter if the orientation was taking place here, but it just repeated the same phrase again.

Well, this was getting pretty obvious. I entered one of the changing rooms in the back, and the moment I closed the door behind me the mask beeped with a new message.

Put On The Mask.

I did, and when it was in place it beeped again before the back of the changing room opened up, revealing a corridor into the darkness.

Ah ha. It had been some kind of puzzle test.

I entered the corridor and the door closed behind me. There were dim guiding lights along the floor, and they led to something I

recognized. It was one of those metal moving rooms that transported drones from one layer to the next. This one only had one button next to it, and I pressed it. The doors opened immediately.

I entered the small room and found there were no buttons on the inside, only a metal bar to hold onto along the sides, and a single red lever next to the door labeled "Emergency Stop." Luckily I recognized the symbols thanks to my time at the school, and I knew enough not to pull it.

I'd had my fill of 'fire alarms' already.

The doors closed on their own and I was on my way. Unlike the room back at the test chamber that went up and down, this room went in multiple directions. During transit I detected the room changing directions more than once. If my guess was correct, I was somewhere in the underground tunnel layer by this point. Jasper was right about super villains and underground lairs it seems.

The room finally came to a stop and opened into a brightly lit corridor, lined with lots of frames for multiple metal moving rooms, above each was the location where that moving room came from. Seems like you could get to almost anywhere on Ashwood St. using this place.

I followed the corridor until it exited into a large empty room. Tables and chairs were scattered around and there was a small box-like device on a table in the corner, along with a 'coffee maker'. Several other doors and corridors were spaced out along the walls, making me think of the test chambers again.

A multitude of masked drones were milling about the room. Some talked in small groups, however most of them seemed to be keeping to themselves. Almost all of them were wearing the black face masks, and I only spotted three other drones wearing the full cover shells. One was the drone with the red shirt from earlier, another was a bit smaller than me and wore red metal hand coverings, and the last was an obvious combat model drone, standing at about eight feet high with its skin covered completely in thick green scales. These three stood alone in their own little pockets of space.

The last drone in the room was somewhat different than the others. This one wore a red mask that was physically identical to the white masks except for the color and two stubby horns that poked out from the forehead. Its body coverings were different as well, made of a black, flexible material that appeared armored and covered it from its neck to its feet. The only other items it possessed were a pair of projectile weapons it kept in holsters under its shoulders. The red mask drone was talking to three other drones with black face masks, one of which was the Lily drone from the recruiting office. It was unmistakable with its scales and claws.

Nobody in the room gave instructions, so I just found an empty seat and sat down to wait. I did see Mikey in the crowd, standing awkwardly near some of the other drones that appeared to be younger. Most of them appeared nervous. Mikey didn't recognize me with the white mask on, and I realized I hadn't told him I signed up as a powered minion.

Eh, I would tell him later.

We waited until about nine thirty before the red mask drone cleared its throat and addressed the room.

"Alright, looks like anyone who's coming is here, anyone showing up later than this is fired anyways. Come closer and grab a seat if you want. My name's Imp, and I work for Hellion. Welcome to orientation, we've got some announcements to make before we proceed with the physical portion of the job interview, and before you ask, yes this is still part of the interview."

Most of the drones shuffled and took seats, a few choosing to stand around the edges of the room.

"First of all just to make sure no one is still confused, this is a henching job for the Super **Villain** known as Hellion. It involves doing criminal activities which may or may not result in injury, incarceration, or death. If any of these sound bad to you feel free to leave, just do me a favor and leave your mask in the changing room on your way out. This goes for all of you at any time during this orientation. If you don't want to be here, we don't want you here. Oh, and don't bother trying to inform police or heroes about this meeting, nothing we do at this orientation is illegal and I can guarantee they probably already know about it anyways."

Surprisingly after this announcement quite a few of the drones did in fact leave. Mostly the young nervous looking ones, but a few of the older drones left as well, one was even a combat model. I noted that Mikey chose to stay.

"Speaking of heroes there are some things you should know. We hold these orientations every Saturday and sometimes the heroes do like to crash the party. If they do, calmly head for any of the exits marked in green, even if they catch you we aren't doing anything illegal. The other lieutenants and I will have to jam, but you can just say you

were coerced into being here, one of our lawyers will contact you either way."

Again a few drones left at this.

"Next, if you actually aren't supposed to be here. Say you're a hero who snuck in, or a rival gang spy, know that we almost always find out. We aren't a bunch of rookies here, Hellion's Henchmen has been around for over a decade, and you don't last that long if a single mole would bring you down. This goes double if you're just some dumb punk who thought they'd sneak in to topple us from inside, or turn us into the police and heroes later. If you aren't working directly for a legal agency any crimes you commit while working for us are real crimes and you will most likely be prosecuted for them. *Without* our lawyers to help you. If any of this applies to you you don't have to rush out right this second, just sneak out sometime today or just don't come back."

None of the drones left this time. But I noted that a few looked like they wanted to.

"Now about your masks. Make sure you keep them on while on the job and use your call-signs. We regulars tend to be a bit loosey-goosey with our identities since we have great lawyers and the capes tend to know who we are already anyway. But if you're only with us temporarily you'll want to keep your identity as secret as possible, especially if you plan to work for Central later on. We've had some people come through who went on to have really respectable jobs, even a hero or two who needed the money bad enough. I'll mention that if any of you guys in the helmets plan to do hero work later I recommend you switch to a face mask if your power is too recognizable."

That was an interesting bit of information. I was surprised by how casually Imp treated the possibility of encountering someone here as an enemy later. And how he didn't seem to hold any anger for the possible spies and enemies who might show up. Maybe this was those 'unspoken rules' at play, everything seemed to be almost friendly the way Imp spoke about it.

But I had seen the Merc blow up a bus full of civilians, and the Guardian risk its life to save me. I doubted everything was quite as... 'civil' as Imp made it out to be.

Imp continued to the next part of the orientation. "Okay everyone, I think that's mostly everything. If I haven't scared you off yet, next is the physical part of the orientation. This is meant to both give us an idea of what you can do and to give you an idea of what being a minion takes. If you would all follow me please.

'Imp' left through a large double door in the side of the room, followed by Lily and the other masked drones he had been talking to earlier. The crowd of potential minions got up to shuffle through after him.

The double door led into a corridor, at the end of which was another set of doors that led into a massive empty room. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all made out of the same stone material they used back in the test chambers. Lighting was provided by large lit panels in the ceiling, and white lines were inscribed in concentric ovals on the floor.

Imp waited for the crowd of drones to finish entering before

addressing them again. "Alright, there aren't a lot of requirements to be a minion. You do what I and the other lieutenants say, the job gets done, you go home paid. But every now and then cops and capes will show up to stop the party and that's when you have to make a choice: do you surrender or do you run for it? For now start running laps about the room."

Hmm, seemed simple enough. I started running in the direction he indicated and several drones followed me. Curiously most of the drones looked confused and hadn't started running, did they really not understand what they had to do? Only a couple of the drones had followed after me, and only the drone with the white mask and red hand coverings had been as quick to follow the order.

BANG

Instantly I swiveled my head in the direction of the sound and took a combat stance. Imp had taken one of his weapons and fired it at the ceiling. Once I observed he didn't intend any hostile actions I went back to running, although I kept my senses trained on him.

"That wasn't a suggestion rookies. Either get running or leave, the door is right behind you," yelled Imp to the room. Most of the drones started running, but a few left out the door.

"The thing about being a minion is that its actually pretty easy work. The super villains you work for will be doing all the hard parts, making the plan, getting the essential components for whatever machinery they need, fighting the heroes, all that good jazz. Most of what you'll be doing is moving boxes around, standing guard, maybe driving a car, and running. Lots and lots of running. See the thing is, while you're wearing that mask you are an anonymous person, no

one cares about who you are, only what you're doing and who you're working for. In the eyes of the law you are an accessory to the super villain's crime, a tool in the same way a death ray or a robot is. Anything you do is their fault, they made the plan, they did the crime, and when the police ask why you were working for them you just plead that they forced you. Not like you could stand up to a super villain, they threatened you, your job, your family, and boom, instant excuse.

Now, that all sounds pretty good on paper. Just surrender and theoretically the law can't touch you. But that's not always the way things go in real life. What if a rival gang makes a surprise attack on the warehouse you're guarding? What if some random Joe-schmo with powers decides to take the bank robbery personally? Or a mutant animal thinks you look like a snack? What if some overactive hero throws a bus at the villain? Why, in all of the above cases you run like a bat out of hell ladies and gentlemen. You can't get paid if you're dead."

For the next hour we kept running around the room, Imp sometimes commenting with a random fact or observation about the job. Most of the drones couldn't run for the full hour (I was surprised when some couldn't run even ten minutes), but stopping didn't mean they were sent home. Instead they were instructed to get their breath back and then keep going. I managed to gather quite a bit of data on average drone physical abilities. The majority seemed unable to run past the fifteen minute mark, but a few outliers were able to keep the pace set by those in front, mostly the combat models among the black masks.

Finally Imp stopped the runners, warning them to walk a cool down lap.

"Alright everyone, good job persevering. Now that I've got you good

and tired out it's time to show you the next part of the workout."

Several groans rose up from the crowd upon hearing that. I was almost a bit disturbed by how bad most of them seemed at physical activity. Not what I had expected from organisms that ate such nutrient dense food.

"Okay, everyone in the black masks please follow Viper to the small gym," At this he gestured to the drone I knew as 'Lily'. "And you guys in the white masks follow me."

The four of us in the white masks stepped forward and followed Imp into a side room that was almost as large as the room we were just in, but this one contained large devices everywhere.

"So, I know some of you, Ifrit, Olson. Nice to have you back with us by the way Olson," He nodded to the small one with red metal hand covers and then the one with the red shirt. Olson nodded back at him.

"Good to be back Imp," replied the red shirt drone.

"And for you new guys what's your call signs?" asked Imp.

"You can call me Gregor," replied the green scaled drone.

"My name is Tofu," I replied.

"Nice to meet you both. Now, as you might imagine the physical side of the job is a bit more intense for you guys in the white masks. What we're gonna do is some physical tests to see what your limits are. Like you heard in the interview process you don't have to state how your power works, but I need to know a little about your capabilities if we're gonna work together in the field. Do you mind giving me a brief rundown?"

"That's fine with me," replied Gregor. "I've got enhanced strength and stamina. I've blocked knives and stuff with my scales, most stuff bounces off, but I can't stop high caliber bullets."

Then Imp turned to me. Luckily I had been talking to Tim a lot about super powers, and I had planned ahead of time for what I would reveal of my abilities.

"I've got regeneration and a few physical modifications. A bullet won't kill me unless it hits a bad spot."

According to Tim regeneration was a rather common power, and as I had seen everywhere physical modifications were quite abundant.

"Good to know, we'll be getting all of you suits eventually to help with the bullet problem," said Imp. "Theoretically you shouldn't need them since you will be doing minion work just like everyone else, but the honest truth is you're gonna have some stuff aimed your way. Now, to tell you a little about myself, as said before my name is Imp, I've worked for Hellion about fifteen years now, and my power is teleportation of myself and small objects."

Suddenly his projectile weapons were out of his holsters and in his hands, they hadn't moved, they just appeared there as if they had been there the whole time.

Estimated threat: Very High.

If he could move objects around instantly like that fighting him could be tricky. Who knows what weapon could appear in his hands, and he said he can move like that himself?

"Now then," said Imp, "Time for the fun part."

We spent the next hour using the different machines in the room to test for strength, reflexes, and stamina. I tried to intentionally lower my results, no reason to reveal my limits to them, but I did keep myself in line with the other two modified drones. Gregor was of course obviously modified, but it turned out Ifrit was as well, some kind of internal variant if my guess was correct, as she had extra strength and her reflexes were quite fast. Her size and movements were in line with my own so I attempted to model my results mostly after hers.

The strangest one was Olson, who as far as I could tell was a completely normal drone. Perhaps he had one of the anomalous powers then. I really wanted to figure out how to get one of those, but so far drones had been rather secretive on the subject, never saying the actual mechanism behind it and instead referring to it as 'trigger' or 'awakening' or 'quirked', or any number of other things. As far as I could tell all of the terms meant the same thing: you now had super powers.

We were finishing up a weight lifting test when a drone wearing a black mask came in through the door. This was one of the ones that had been talking to Imp and Lily (or perhaps I should say Viper while she's masked) back in the room with tables and chairs.

Imp turned to it and said, "Hey Adder, you guys finished up already with the others?"

"Almost, Viper is still pounding the stuffing out of the last few, and Rattleback is handing out the band-aids and stuff. You about ready for me in here?"

"Yeah I think so," then he turned to us, "Let me introduce you to Adder folks, she, Viper, and Rattleback are our primary combat trainers for the minions. If you need hand to hand combat training, you come to Adder here."

"Pleased to meet you all," replied Adder.

After introductions Imp led the way to a section of padded floor in one corner of the room.

"So then," said Imp, "Lets see what you guys got."

Ch13 Preheat The Oven To 10,000 Degrees

I hit the floor with an audible **thump**. Again.

What was going on?

Attack pattern calculation failed.

Once Imp led us to the section of padded floor, he had explained that we would be doing something called barehanded combat training. At first I was worried that this would be like the combat tests the white coats used to make me do, but Imp explained that the goal was simply to knock your opponent down to the ground, and not to kill them like I was used to.

Ifrit was the first to challenge Adder, and I thought she did relatively well. Their movements were odd, and I attributed the strange movements to them basing their combat patterns on not trying to harm each other. They exchanged a few blows before Adder gained the upper hand and knocked Ifrit to the floor. From what I could tell Adder focused on grabbing Ifrit's coverings and using them to redirect her motion, while Ifrit tried to do similar. Neither attempted to use powers or a weapon. It seemed simple enough. Ifrit then stood up and, for some reason, bent her torso in Adder's direction, which Adder then reciprocated.

I couldn't figure out what the purpose of the gesture was.

"Okay, how about you next Tofu?" said Imp.

I stepped forward onto the mat and took an offensive position until Imp announced the start. When he did I moved forward and tried a few jabs to see what Adder would do.

Then the next thing I knew I was on the floor.

> Error: calculating attack pattern failed;
>
> Estimated threat: Very High;

That was odd. From the sensory stimuli I recorded I knew that Adder had grabbed my arm after the third jab. I had tried to shift my weight to take advantage and then... I was suddenly staring at the ceiling.

"Nice try Tofu, Gregor, you're up next," said Imp.

I got up and went to stand next to the other drones while trying to figure out what just happened. Gregor approached next and I resolved to closely analyze their fight to see if I could identify the attack pattern that Adder was using.

The fight started and Gregor charged forward, obviously intending to use his weight and size to barrel down his smaller opponent. Adder avoided Gregor by dodging low to the ground, out of reach of his hands, and took advantage of his charge to trip one of his feet. At first I didn't think her lower mass would be enough to halt his

momentum, but instead of just throwing her body against his foot she had grabbed his leg in some kind of limb-lock and Gregor fell to the floor as his leg failed to obey him.

From the sounds Gregor made it was also pretty painful. I kept forgetting about using pain, it didn't debilitate me, and some other organisms like the anomalous yellow-fur just ignored it, so it seemed a risky tactic to employ.

After that it was Olson's turn, despite his protests.

"Come on Olson, I pro~mise I'll go easy on you," said Adder while flashing a smile.

"I felt your easy last time too, and I've still got the bruises to prove it," he replied.

Adder laughed at that, and despite his denial of being able to fight her Olson actually did the best of any of us, lasting almost a full minute before he fell.

Ifrit went again and did a little better this time, but fell quickly enough. Then it was my turn again.

Defensive protocol;

I took a defensive position rather than an offensive one this time. I

was going to treat this like a brown-fur fight. If a single mistake got me thrown to the ground then it was a lot like how a brown-fur could critically injure me in a single blow.

I didn't move when the fight started, instead allowing her to come to me. She raised her brows in surprise at this, but obliged me in being the attacker this time. I lasted a little longer by not allowing her to get an easy hold on me, but eventually the fact that I was guarding too zealously allowed her to corner me and slip an arm past my guard. I tried to retaliate by counter grabbing, but the moment I did I was on the floor again.

"Much better that time Tofu," said Adder.

From that point forward we took turns trying to knock Adder over, but by the end of the hour none of us had succeeded. I improved for sure, but I just couldn't keep up with Adder's attack patterns. I had found that she didn't stick to one overall protocol and instead just switched to match her opponent. I had always thought I was pretty good at switching my patterns to match the situation, but the sheer amount of patterns she displayed put my repertoire to shame. Plus, I think she used some kind of power, because in a few of our fights she seemed to... disappear.

Once we were done Adder began to tell each of us how to improve starting with Ifrit. Apparently Ifrit and Adder knew each other, and outside of the job Adder acted as Ifrit's 'martial arts' teacher. Then she turned to me.

"So Tofu, you're pretty rough but you've got good instincts, you're self taught right?"

"Um, yes. How could you tell?"

"A couple small details, but they show that you're more used to a straight street brawl. Quick engagements, go for the throat, don't take risks unless you have too, that kind of stuff. Basically you fight like a caged animal. Against any average brawler it will work just fine, but if you fight someone with real training, especially capes, they will probably know how to handle it. No worries though, you've got the talent, I'll whip you into shape," she said with a wink.

I hoped that wasn't literal.

Adder gave some advice to Gregor and then went over what Olson had been doing for training while he was away. Apparently Olson had worked on and off for Hellion since last Odd Summer, but had to stop a year ago due to 'personal issues'.

Adder finished giving us her analysis before Imp spoke up. "Well folks that was a good workout. How about we head to the break room and get some grub?"

Grub?

We followed him back to the room with tables and chairs. Inside were some of the masked drones that had gone with Adder and Viper. They looked a bit scuffed up, scraps and small sticky 'band-aids' applied to them in some places. Notably of the twenty five or so that had gone with Viper and Adder only about ten were still here,

including Mikey.

But far more importantly, most of them had a plate of food in front of them.

I checked for the source, and on top of a very large, long table placed against the back of the room I saw the food. It was... it was...

Beautiful;

I needed to borrow the drone word for it, because this was not a concept I had ever really dealt with before. Plentiful, nutritious, amazing, astounding, confusing. Those were the closest I had come before now. But now I understood.

There were literal *piles* of food on the table. I noted burgers and sandwiches like the ones at Maggie's, but there were lots of foods that I had no name for.

Imp walked forward and addressed the room, "Well that does it for the orientation. Feel free to grab what you want and chow down, think of it as an apology for throwing you into a hard workout with the trainers on your first day. We tend to reserve spreads like this for after we do the big jobs so make sure you try out everything while you can. I'll be getting in touch tomorrow or the day after with your first job, so keep your eyes on your masks. If for some reason you absolutely can't get to a job at the time we list press the cancel notification button. DO NOT abuse that option, we need it to plan how many people are coming. If you have a day job you think is going to get in the way let Sandra know at the office so she can send

us a schedule we can work around. Other than that you're done for the day, congrats on surviving your first day as a minion!"

There were a few sounds of acknowledgment from the crowd and Imp left through a side room. I waited long enough for Adder to show me how to open the white mask to allow for eating before I made a direct path to the food.

So many options! I piled a plate as high as I could get it. There were veggies wrapped in these bread things, and bowls for some kind of thick liquid, and meat! I didn't know that drones actually ate meat, the stuff on the table had been cooked in much the same way as the burgers, and I didn't know what organism it came from.

Yup, it wouldn't all fit, so I made a second plate and placed a bowl of the liquid on top of the second food pile. I wouldn't be able to carry any more in a single trip without shifting, and I took one plate in each hand before I headed to the seating area. Scanning the room I saw that Mikey's table was empty so I decided to sit with him. I still needed to tell him I was wearing a white mask anyways.

I made my way over to Mikey's table before plopping down my food. "Hello Mikey! Amazing food they have here right? Much better than the cafeteria food."

Mikey was somewhat unfortunate, as at that moment he started to cough and choke before he could greet me back. Probably some food in his windpipe, a terrible design flaw that most drones shared, poor guy.

Cough cough "T-Tofu? That you?"

"Yes, are you alright?"

"I-**cough-**yeah I'm fine. What in the world are you doing with a white mask? You had powers?"

"Yes, is that so surprising? You witnessed me toss the scumbag."

"I, well I thought you just had a stronger than normal benedicci reaction I guess. I didn't really have time to think about it."

Ha, this joke I understood. Needing time to think, he had nearly a whole week to do so. I would have to remember to laugh when drones made jokes, sometimes they behaved oddly when you didn't react with laughter.

"So Tofu, you have like, a real super power then?"

I had planned on telling anyone who asked that I had mutavus, as that was what I most heard associated with physical alterations. The super power label seemed to be reserved for the physics defying powers.

"No, it's not a real power." I answered

"Oh, so it *was* benedicci? Or... is it mutavus then?" Mikey asked hesitantly.

"It's rude to ask kid," came a deep voice with a slight hiss I recognized as Gregor's.

I turned to see the hulking green figure of Gregor. He had also smartly piled two plates of food. Seems he favored the cooked meat items.

"Mind if I sit here?" asked Gregor, mostly to me.

"No, go ahead," I answered back.

He placed his plates down with a thunk at an empty spot. Then sat down in the chair with an even bigger **thump**.

A suddenly pale-face Mikey responded, "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean any offense."

Gregor's expression softened a bit before he answered (he had taken his mask off to eat), "None taken. Just know it's not nice to ask that casually, and around C's it can be rather unwise to ask at all."

"O-oh, I see," said Mikey, then he turned to me, "Sorry Tofu."

"No worries," I muffled past a mouthful of food.

We talked a bit but mostly I concentrated on eating. It was really really good, especially the cooked meat. I might have overdone it a bit though, as Mikey commented on how much I was eating.

"Dang dude! Where are you putting it all?" exclaimed Mikey. Even Gregor seemed impressed.

"I digest quickly."

"Like a high metabolism?"

"Yes, that."

Note to self: find out what 'metabolism' means.

Not much else happened besides Rattleback coming by and introducing himself to me and Gregor. Apparently he was the 'quartermaster' for equipment, and asked if I had any special requirements for using my abilities. I mentioned I had higher than normal 'metabolism' and that I would need something to help against bullets. He replied that they would try to get me a suit soon, and he would look into getting some speedster MREs, whatever those were.

Once he left Mikey announced he was going back for 'seconds' and was quite surprised when I went with him for more. No telling when

the next meal would come around, and this was the best tasting I had ever eaten. I was very glad I had taken Jasper's advice in getting a job, especially one that let me claim my abilities were a 'power'.

I eventually had to call it quits on getting more food, even the large drone Gregor had begun to look worried over how much I was eating. Mikey and I left to the 'elevators' and instead of heading my separate way I went with Mikey to "hang out" as he put it. The elevator let us out in a 'gym locker room', and after Mikey called Tim on his 'phone' the three of us 'hung out' for the next few hours. It was an interesting experience, especially when they took me to an 'arcade', a type of reflex/puzzle testing chamber that focused on using screens to make hypothetical simulations. There wasn't any physical danger, so I found it rather relaxing.

Tim was quite happy when we told him that Mikey had gotten a job at the same place where I worked. Our 'cover story' was that we were working at various warehouses that stocked food for 'grocery stores', an excuse Mikey thought up.

After a few hours Tim eventually had to leave for the day, and Mikey went with him since they lived in the same general area. I left to go to the tunnel entrance again, deciding to simply rest while going over my observations of the combat with Adder. Her explanation of my combat patterns made sense to me, I had in fact been fighting many caged animals at the test chambers, and most of my protocols were based on that experience. In truth the only drone I had really fought had been the blade drone on the subway, and it had been one of my most challenging fights to date. All of my other experiences versus drones had been surprise attacks, against opponents who I now knew had no idea what they were doing. Not if Adder, or even Ifrit and Olson, were the standard.

I definitely had to ask Adder to train me when I had the chance. Not only had she changed between widely different combat patterns on the fly, but while fighting she had sometimes managed to visibly disappear, normally right before I hit the ground. It might have been a power, but somehow I doubted it. I just needed a little more information and I felt like I'd have the answer.

After contemplating the combat data for a few hours I had to get up and hunt rats for a while. I was simply too restless, for the first time ever I had resources to burn and an avenue of improvement that I wanted, not just needed, to pursue.

I was really looking forward to the upcoming job.

My mask had beeped Sunday morning and informed me that there was a job at ten p.m. For most of the daylight hours I had simply wandered around the city near Ashwood St. to pass the time. By this point I had mapped all the roads and walkways, and noted all the food dispensaries in the area, categorizing them by price and how likely it was I could steal food from them and get away with it.

Now I was waiting for the elevator in the corridor at 514 Ashwood St. at nine thirty. Like last time Olson again showed up to use this elevator.

"Hello there, Tofu right?" he asked.

"Yes, hello Olson."

Just like last time he was wearing a red shirt and blue leg coverings, although it wasn't the same kind of shirt. Today it had buttons.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened for us. It was a ways until the elevator would drop us off so I decided to see what information I could get from him.

"So, you have worked for Hellion before? May I ask what it was like?"

"Oh, sure. Well there isn't much to say really, Hellion sends us a job and we do it is really the sum of my experience. I never hired on as more than a part-timer. Most of the time it's working for some villain who payed Hellion to provide the muscle."

"Ah, does this mean we won't actually meet Hellion herself?"

"Oh no, you definitely will. She has to spend most of her time running everything now, but she used to be the real hands-on type. I met her plenty of times even though I never became a regular."

"I see... I don't suppose you would be able to tell me a little about the dangers we will be facing."

"First day jitters huh? No worries, even if you're wearing the skull mask you won't need to do much. Just do what the lieutenants tell

you and it'll work out."

"I suppose."

The conversation ended there, and the elevator doors soon opened to let us out. I followed Olson to the same meeting room as last time, and there was a sign with an arrow on it placed next to one of the doors.

"Ah, looks like we're meeting in the garage today," said Olson.

The hallway we entered eventually led to a large room filled with various transport devices. Some of the drones from the orientation were here, but most of the drones I didn't recognize. These were probably the 'regulars' as they tended to look more confident than the orientation drones, and their dark clothing also looked carefully assembled for the job. Belt pouches, equipment, backpacks, weapons, I cataloged the items since they were what the veterans considered necessary. Rattleback worked among them, and was occasionally giving orders that the other drones hurried to complete.

Imp stood with Viper and Ifrit next to a new drone that I hadn't seen before. It stood only a little taller than myself and Ifrit, and its custom mask didn't look like it was built for combat, instead seeming to be mostly protective eye-wear with assorted attachments. Its coverings consisted of a single brown full-body cover that had multiple loops and pouches, from which various devices hung.

Imp waved me and Olson over and we approached them.

"Hey Olson, Tofu. Olson you remember Socket don't you?" said Imp.

"I sure do, how's it been old man?" replied Olson, reaching for and shaking Socket's hand.

"Pfft, old my arse. You'll wear out before my parts do, guarantee it. Good ta have you back sonny" said Socket as he greeted Olson with a wide smile.

Imp spoke to me, "Tofu, let me introduce you to Socket. Rattleback handles all the logistics and equipment, but Socket here makes all the little things we can't live without, like your masks and the fancy pants elevators."

"Ah, you made the mask Socket? It is quite good, it does not hinder my senses at all," I said as I shook Socket's hand.

"Bah, that generic paper weight? Stay with us for the long haul and I'll make you a real mask," He said it gruffly, but he shook my hand and smiled all the same. "Good ta be getting so much young blood this year. Was afraid I'd be stuck with all these fuddy-duddys forever. They never want me ta upgrade their hunks a junk."

Imp and Olson both chuckled before Olson replied, "Maybe my memory *is* failing me. I seem to remember you kept wanting to add a bunch of horrible add-ons to the stuff you made right the first time. Changed your ways while I was gone?"

"Yer just stuck in the past is all it is. Wouldn't know a good upgrade from a slap in the face. Tha's the problem with old folks like you," retorted Socket.

The three of them laughed together, it seemed they knew each other quite well. I felt just a bit better that Ifrit didn't laugh at whatever jokes they were making either though, this 'humor' thing still escaped me, and I was glad I didn't stand out too much.

"Alright then," said Imp as he walked to a pile of items, "Let's start handing out equipment. Tofu you said you had regeneration right?"

"That is correct."

"Alright. Here, this jacket looks about your size," and Imp handed me what seemed to be a thick, padded torso cover. "That and your mask should keep your vitals from taking a full force hit. The jacket is not completely bullet proof mind you, but it should do the heavy lifting, and your mask will block anything but the worst, Socket does good work."

Oh, I figured the mask was tough when the rat couldn't scratch it, but it could take bullet fire?

I slowly began shifting my core into my head.

More equipment was handed out, and the rest of the minions eventually showed up, including Gregor and Mikey. The equipment handouts were interesting. All of the minions received bullet-resistant jackets and a generic black helmet they could put on while wearing their mask. Gregor received an extra large jacket, and Ifrit already had a bodysuit like Imp's, but Olson didn't take any equipment at all beyond his mask and a 'crowbar'.

Once everything was set Imp gathered all the new drones and gave us instructions: "Alright everyone, in a moment we're gonna split you up into the vehicles and have you play ride along. Tonight's job is a simple warehouse smash and grab. I go in with some of the veterans and the powers, and crack the place open. Once we're done you come in and start taking boxes out to the vans. If anyone at all shows up, drop what you're doing and run for the vehicles, or just scatter and let your mask guide you to a safe house. ***Absolutely*** don't take your mask off until you've gotten back to base. Sometimes the heroes like to use trackers and if they catch you with your mask off it can make the legal proceedings a lot harder."

They started sorting the minions into the 'vehicles' and Imp led me and the other powered minions to a 'van'. This was interesting to me since I had only ever ridden on the subway. The inside of the van was rather bare, but it had utilitarian seats that could fit anybody along the sides, even Gregor. Once everyone was in and adjusted, Imp started the vehicle and drove up a ramp that led swiftly upwards and into a very strange, reinforced looking room.

Once the entire convoy of vehicles entered the reinforced room, Imp pressed a button on the console in front of him, and the entire room started to move! These drones liked their transport devices just a bit too much. When I commented on the entire room being a transport elevator, Imp merely said it was to have multiple points of exit to keep the heroes guessing.

I'm starting to suspect that drones simply enjoy not walking.

The trip by elevator took five minutes, and then a metal door opened that led out into an empty street. The exit we emerged from looked like one of many similar buildings that stood in the area. Gray and lacking in details to distinguish them from each other.

The section of Ashwood St. we emerged from was on the eastern end of Ashwood St., near the 900 numbered buildings, and we began traveling south, in a direction I hadn't yet mapped unfortunately. Most of my efforts had been concentrated on Ashwood itself and north towards Maggie's diner.

The drive took a long time, almost half an hour. Imp mentioned that the area we were heading towards was right near the border between E13 and S13.

Eventually we entered an area where there were very few of the multi-level dwelling buildings. Instead they had been replaced by very large singular structures that Imp identified as warehouses. We drove past multiple structures that all looked alike, until we came to one that had no visible difference that I could see, and parked in the area of flat space reserved for transport vehicles outside of it. Only one other van came with us, the rest of the convoy instead kept going. Imp turned to us once he parked the car.

"Alright you guys, here's the plan. I'm going in first and making sure the security system is dead. The rest of you are gonna follow along behind me with Olson, and he'll explain what to look out for and how to deal with anything unexpected. I'm not expecting any trouble at

this first one since they don't have night workers, so it's gonna be like a show and tell. Once we're done cracking it open we leave and the minions will go in and clear it out. Our next destination will be the next warehouse."

"What's to stop the cops or heroes from showing up while we aren't here?" asked Gregor.

Imp grinned and replied, "Why, they are going to be just a tiny bit busy with more important going-ons. You see, we have a kind of unofficial tradition here at Hellion's Henchmen. We try to make the first job of Odd Summer as big of a show as we can. Let's the heroes and other villains know we aren't afraid of them *or* Odd Summer, and it lets Fortress City know we are open for business. Kind of a show of force and an advertisement all wrapped up in one."

Imp turned and sat straight in his seat again, looking out the front window.

"Hellion's currently setting up for the party right now. All we gotta do is sit back and wait for the signal."

"What's the signal?" I asked.

"Oh, you'll see it, no worries," replied Imp.

We waited in silence for about fifteen minutes, Imp relaxing in the driver's seat and the rest of us fidgeting in the back of the van. But

the signal did eventually come, and I did indeed recognize it.

I thought it was the sun at first.

The horizon, long dark after the sun went down, lit up again as an absolutely massive fireball rose into the sky. The shock-wave from the blast rolled over us a few seconds later, and Imp slowly lowered his window after it stopped rattling.

"Yep," said Imp. "It's not really summer until the first big heat."

Ch14 Egg Scramble

Estimated size: 1 'city block';

"That's... that is a really big explosion," I replied.

"Yeah, I think she's trying to show off since we have so many newbies this time," answered Imp. "Anyways it's time to go. I'll meet you in a bit, remember to let Olson lead the way in."

And then suddenly Imp wasn't there anymore. It was unnerving how quiet his 'teleporting' was. Ambushes would be ***so*** easy if I could do that.

Olson opened the side door on the van and we followed him out. Then Olson began a leisurely walk to the warehouse.

"Shouldn't we be more... stealthy?" I asked.

"No point," replied Olson. "Imp does the sneaky part of taking out the security alarms without setting them off, and there aren't exactly a lot of people around these kinds of places at night. Besides, you're in the capes n' cowls business now. What's the point of wearing these awesome masks if no one ever gets to see them? Take it from me, half the power of being a cowl comes from people running the other way at the sight of you. Need to represent the brand, makes things a lot simpler and even safer in the long run."

Hmm, I suppose he had a point, even if it was anathema to my usual way of doing things.

Olson led us to a door in the side of the building. It had one of those devices with numbered keys attached next to the door frame, and a tiny red light on it blinked steadily. Olson waited for a few minutes and the light on the handle turned to green with a beep.

"Wait, give it another sec," Olson said when we started moving forward to enter. After one more minute the light blinked off completely and we heard a click from the inside as the lock disengaged.

"Sometimes even when the alarm *looks* like it is off, it isn't. Best to just wait until everything is dead, you can never be sure if they tried to get tricky with their security," he said as he opened the door.

"Why does the lock disengage when the power goes off?" I asked.

"Because it's a fire hazard if they don't," replied a raspy voice.

Surprisingly it was Ifrit who had spoken. I had never heard her talk before. Her voice sounded like bits of dry paper scraping against each other.

We entered into a small room and corridor system before we reached

the warehouse proper, inside of which we were met by Imp. He showed us some of what he had done, mainly avoiding cameras and applying one of Socket's gizmos to the warehouse 'network'. His method of entry was simply teleporting to and through a high window on the wall.

There was no one else inside the warehouse, so we left and told the minions outside that it was clear to enter. Then we piled back into the van and headed for the next warehouse.

"Well, that was pretty uneventful, just the way we like it. You guys got any questions?" asked Imp.

I considered it before asking: "What were we stealing?"

I hadn't actually seen anything I would consider valuable. There wasn't any food or money or weapons inside.

"Just a few odds and ends that Socket had on his shopping list. That warehouse is a storage and distribution center for several different electronics manufacturers. That's why we only had a van there, the next one will need one of the trucks."

We drove for only a few minutes before coming to another warehouse. The truck we were meeting was already parked in the 'parking lot', and we wasted no time in exiting the van and heading to where Olson indicated.

This time went a bit differently than the last one. Instead of the alarm going dead, the door was opened by one of the employees of the facility. The reason it let us in was Imp, standing behind him with one of his 'pistols' out and in his hand. Again Imp led us inside to show us some of the security systems he had bypassed, while Olson watched over a few warehouse drones that had been inside the facility.

This warehouse made much more sense to me. It was filled with food! There were crates full of a variety of different food items, and parts of the warehouse were taken up by artificially cooled rooms that contained 'perishable' items such as fresh fruit. Again I was impressed with the clever solutions drones employed to solve important problems.

We left the warehouse (to my disappointment), and told the minions it was safe to enter. Olson was assigned to stay with them since it was standard policy to keep a super around if hostages were involved. Apparently just the threat of super powers was enough to keep them docile.

The next warehouse was where things got interesting.

Imp explained as we drove to our destination: "Okay guys, the next one is going to be a meat storage facility. It's going to have some security and they will most likely have guns. Nothing your jackets won't take, but I don't want you guys panicking if some of the guards start popping off on you. Tofu, since you can regenerate I want you in front of Gregor and Ifrit if you get caught out of cover. Think you can do that?"

"Yes, as long as they don't shoot enough bullets to overwhelm me."

"They should be carrying handguns, about ten to twenty shots depending on how cheap their bosses are feeling. That sound okay?"

"Yes, that should be fine."

I had been worried for a second, the drones had used thousands of rounds on the yellow-fur, if the guards here only had a few dozen it wouldn't be enough to kill me.

We arrived at the warehouse and Imp parked the van on the street next to the building rather than in the parking lot. The reason why being a small security checkpoint that separated the parking section from the main road.

"Alright, give me about twenty minutes to get the alarms down and then walk in like you own the place. Try not to kill the guards if you can, just disarm them or send em running. This is the last stop of the night so we don't need to keep it too quiet. The trucks will be coming in right behind you."

Then Imp disappeared as he teleported onto the roof of the warehouse. We waited in the van like he said, and at the twenty minute mark left to enter the warehouse ourselves. As we approached the small security hut I realized I had forgotten to ask Imp something.

"Um, exactly how do we 'walk like we own the place'?"

Gregor chuckled at my question and replied, "A little like this," He moved ahead of us and reached the security hut, a tiny structure with a yellow/black pole that provided a (rather flimsy) barrier to oncoming vehicles. There was a guard inside the room who was fumbling for his weapon, but Gregor ignored him, and instead he reached out and pressed against the pole until it simply popped off its mount.

The guard abandoned its attempt to unholster its weapon, simply raising its hands and running away as fast as it could run (which wasn't very fast). How utterly perplexing. This was supposed to be security? This wasn't even slightly comparable to the soldiers I had seen in the test chambers.

"Why do they even bother hiring these guards if they are so ineffective?" I asked.

"Its like Olson said. Half the power of power is simply the threat of using it. They don't actually pay the guards enough to risk their lives defending this place, the guards are just hired to provide the image of security. We were both bluffing, he just folded first," answered Gregor.

Interesting.

We approached and entered the facility to meet up with Imp. Most of the guards or employees we encountered gave up the moment they saw us, dropping their weapons and walking or running away with their hands up. One security drone did try to ambush us by popping out from behind a corner, but he had waited too long and allowed us to close the distance, so I simply smacked the weapon from his hands. This resulted in an awkward moment where it just stood there

hyperventilating until it collapsed on its own. Gregor laughed a lot at this, and even Ifrit let out a raspy chuckle.

We met up with Imp, and the minions soon came in with two trucks and a van. I soon found myself staring at the amount of meat the minions were packing into the trucks. Gregor tried to tell me that some of the carcasses might be worth over two hundred dollars a pound, but I didn't believe him until Imp confirmed it. It didn't make logical sense to me, paying two hundred dollars for a single pound of meat was inefficient when for the same price I could buy almost twenty tofu burgers. Even if burgers tasted terrible (which they didn't) the meat was simply too expensive to choose it over the nutrients you would get from the burgers instead. When I tried to ask Gregor why anyone would choose to buy the meat, he merely shrugged and said that rich folks have rich tastes.

Either way, Imp promised we would keep some of the meat for ourselves much to my delight.

We were almost done loading up the trucks when Imp teleported from where he had been on a nearby roof into the middle of the group.

"Alright guys its time to scramble! I just got word from Hellion, Turbo left the party early. Drop what you're doing and move!"

Instantly the veteran minions dropped whatever they were holding and scrambled for the trucks and vans, directing the new minions on where to go.

"Tofu! Go with the first truck! Gregor, second truck! Ifrit, go with the minions in the van!" yelled Imp, all casualness gone from his voice as he teleported on top of one of the trucks, guns drawn, to keep a lookout.

I ran for the indicated truck and jumped into the passenger seat. The minion with me already had the engine running, and as soon as another minion closed the container doors we were on our way. The driver aimed for the parking lot entrance and we almost made it.

But then a blur crossed the lot in seconds and attacked the truck. First a brick hit the windshield and cracked the glass, then the driver side door flew open and my driver was pulled from his seat and flung ten feet away. I was slammed into the front dashboard when the blur hit the brake pedal, and then it was gone. Almost immediately I heard gunfire as Imp engaged what must have be Turbo.

Estimated threat: Very High.

Preparing defense protocol: Speedster;

I was already shifting as I got up from my seat and went for my driver. I didn't know how to drive this truck! He was outside on the floor, but luckily he was uninjured and I went to help him. I pulled him up from the ground and we ran for the truck, him in front of me.

The driver reached his seat and punched out the broken window, while I latched onto the door frame and held on as we started to move, scanning for Turbo as we did so. Apparently teleporting was a good defense against speed because Imp was still firing away to try

and keep Turbo away from the trucks, and every time Turbo tried to close on him he simply moved his position and kept firing.

But when the first truck began to move Turbo predictably went after us again.

Some interesting facts about Turbo:

He has super speed. It's fast, but he has to 'push himself' to dodge a bullet that's aimed directly at him.

He can accelerate objects he carries, but if he throws them they only have the normal force they would have had if he was traveling at normal speed. A strange quirk of his power.

He does **not** have super strength.

He is **not** super durable.

He does **not** have regeneration.

And so when he tried to grab me, he triggered one of the 'whiskers' I had been extending, and my leg automatically lashed out, breaking his leg.

I owed Tim lunch.

I had been planning countermeasures against Turbo ever since I first saw him on Ashwood St. My idea had come from the rats in the

sewers. They used whiskers to sense things before they ran into them in the dark, and with Tim telling me all the factoids of the local hero I had made an estimate of how fast I would need to move to catch him by surprise.

True, I had also broken my own leg in doing so.

And used an entire cycle's worth of energy to move that fast.

And now that I look again I don't think Turbo's leg is actually broken, only injured. He's still limping around rather quickly. Dang.

At least it slowed him down enough for Imp to get some clear shots. As Imp increased his barrage my driver stomped the gas pedal and the truck swerved out onto the street. Followed soon after by truck two, and the van full of minions. We quickly split up and went different directions, trying to make sure that the hero couldn't go after all of us.

We traveled for several minutes before my driver spoke up.

"Do you want to come back in the cab?" he asked.

"That's okay, I'm good."

"Alright. Nice work back there by the way."

"Thank you... is this how most jobs typically go?"

The driver laughed and replied, "Yeah, just about."

Then he frowned as he noticed something in the sky and said, "And I don't think this one is over just yet."

I followed his gaze, and hanging in the sky was a flying drone. This one had a purple glow to it as it slowly flew down to a closer position in front of us.

"Would that be Magenta?" I asked the driver.

"Yep."

"Any details you can give me about her?"

"Um, she makes that purplish force field around herself. It's strong and she can make weapons out of it too, claws and swords and stuff. Oh, and she can fly of course."

"Understood. I'll try to lead her away. Be ready to drive"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, how far away is Ashwood street from here?"

"About twenty five blocks north."

"Okay."

"Good luck."

"You too."

I jumped down from the truck, and he started to drive away. Magenta started to fly after him when I yelled as loud as I could, "If you don't stop me I'm going to hurt people!"

Yeah, that got her attention. If the Guardian's behavior was typical of heroes then she would prioritize coming after me rather than pursuing a truck.

She did seem to hesitate for a second, so I took out my knife and waved it around. That helped her decide, and she accelerated towards me.

I ran for it.

I didn't really have the time or interest to grab a hostage of course. The streets were almost empty due to how late it was and Odd Summer warnings. Instead what I wanted to find was an entrance to the sewers.

I swiveled my head backwards every now and then to keep an eye on her as I ran. She was moving just a bit too quickly for my liking. She wasn't a speedster, but flying was definitely faster than running, and even though I was running on all four limbs and burning fuel to stay ahead of her she was still gaining fast. Yeah, this wasn't going to work.

I ran for the nearest building, a multi-level 'apartment'. I scanned the windows for a good candidate and ran straight for it. This one was lit, and showed two drones drinking what I assumed was coffee at a table. Swinging an arm forward I shattered the glass and barreled into the room, heralded by screams from the two drones. I was wrong about the coffee, they were drinking 'tea'.

I knocked the table over as I entered, sending cups and glass flying. Now, if this apartment followed the same design principles as the ones Tim and Mikey lived in, then the entrance should be... here!

I smashed the door open and then continued into a different apartment, smashing that door down too. At this point I was using traction claws on all four limbs, and I used them to maintain speed as I ducked around corners and smashed past random furniture. Drones screamed everywhere.

I busted out of the window in the new apartment and landed in the

street on a new side of the building. Hopefully that would buy me a few moments as she checked the civilian drones for injury. Scanning the area I found what I wanted, a 'manhole cover'. I barreled towards it, and upon reaching it stuck a claw into the small hole maintenance drones used before wrenching it open.

Then Magenta slammed into my side. Her 'force field' was encasing her hands, making them look over-sized, and she pummeled them into me. Each hit broke a bone.

"Surrender now! You are under arrest!" She yelled between hits. Instead of doing that I swung the manhole cover into her face.

It knocked her away, but her force field was indeed strong and she looked untouched if a bit dazed. Touching the force field felt like I was sliding across wet glass, or being blown away by a strong wind.

I settled for throwing the manhole cover at her and dived for the sewer entrance. I was *almost* there when she tackled me around the middle and pulled me to the ground.

Damn, my torso was hanging over the hole but she had a firm grip, and the force field was wrapping tighter by the second. I wasn't going anywhere unless...

"Please! Not so tight! It hurts!" I yelled.

"Yeah yeah. Surrender before you hurt yourself," she replied.

I triggered the micro units in the area she held me. They quickly self-destructed, rupturing the surrounding tissue and causing it to tear. My torso separated from my lower half with a spray of blood, and I made sure that some "viscera" spattered into her face. The force field blocked it, but it obscured her vision as my upper half, and my core, fell into the safety of the darkness below.

I listened to her yells as I fell, and lamented the fact that I hadn't been able to plan for this ahead of time. I lost a little more than half of my mass and resources to pull off that escape, and the loss stung.

That Kobe beef Gregor was talking about better be worth it.

Ch15 Crunchy Critters

That could have gone better.

Mass: 67% norm.

Energy Reserves: 5 cycles non-continuous.

After falling down the sewer tunnel I had played dead for a while, however Magenta didn't decide to come down and confirm if I was dead, so I crawled away soon after. I hadn't bothered to immediately repair my disguise, instead I was regrowing the missing parts as slowly as possible to conserve energy. I had however reconfigured my arms into a better arrangement for walking on. Luckily the sewers were easy terrain to get around in, and empty. Left, right, straight, left again, mostly the sewers followed the streets so telling which way was north wasn't too hard.

I wonder why more drones didn't travel here? Sure there was the rats, but they hadn't proven too dangerous.

My steps echoed down the barren tunnels as I reviewed the night's activities:

The extendable arms and traction claws were proving their worth again and again. They stayed.

The bullet-resistant jacket Imp gave me hadn't come into play, I'd need to test it later.

The speedster defense protocol had worked rather well. It needed fine-tuning for sure, but I had still landed a hit on someone who could dodge bullets.

But my decision making versus Magenta had been somewhat flawed. The description the driver gave me had made me think it was like the Guardian, and while their physical abilities seemed comparable, it definitely hadn't acted like the Guardian. It hadn't stopped to check if the drones in the apartment were okay (or at least not stopped for long), nor had Magenta avoided the use of "excessive force" as Tim claimed the Guardian did. Maybe if I had actually bothered to injure the apartment drones that would have halted Magenta? But Imp claimed harming 'innocent bystanders' simply brought down 'more heat' onto you...

Bait protocol result: failure.

This all came down to my decision to let the driver get away by acting as bait. Next time I wouldn't be bait, I'd just abandon the truck. It was a 'spur of the moment' decision, and logically it was flawed. I guess I put the driver and truck too high in my priorities for some reason.

Human.exe shutdown;

Human.exe decision making flawed: calculating.

Lost resources estimate: 73.4%.

Survival estimate with Human.exe: 87.567%.

Survival estimate without Human.exe: 9.284%

...

Human.exe restart;

Oh well, mistakes were made, might as well learn from them and move on. I survived and that's what's important.

I continued down the uniform tunnels. The sewers were pretty great, they were empty, clean, and there was plenty of fresh water flowing through. Supposedly this place was for waste disposal, but I hadn't seen anything beyond a rust stain or two. Too bad, I would have liked to scavenge.

Right, left, straight, straight, bloodstain... well what have we here. A thin pool of blood was cooling on the floor near a large open pipe. Cautiously I approached and tested it. No, not rat blood, but when I smelled around I definitely caught the scent of rat.

Hmm, probably too risky to follow the trail that led into the large pipe, I didn't recognize the organism this came from. I wanted more mass, but I had enough resources to remake my disguise for now. Better just to find my way back to Ashwood St. before I ran into a bio-weapon, or worse.

I left the pool of blood behind me, but as I neared the next intersection I began to hear scraping sounds from the pipe I had just left behind. Ducking around the corner, I then extended an eye tendril to see what might emerge from the pipe.

The scraping sounds intensified, becoming a scrabbling **thump, thump, thump,** as whatever was coming down the pipe seemed in a hurry.

And I could hear the chittering of rats.

The thumping noise built to a climax, and then a new organism I had never seen before burst from the pipe and splashed into the stream of water that ran down the center of the tunnel.

Estimated mass: 3.6 drones equivalent.

It had a long body that was low to the ground and obviously amphibious. Four stubby legs propelled it at surprising speed, and the length of its body was covered in a patchwork assortment of green and silver scales. At the end of a very long neck that made up almost a third of its length was placed a head that simply extended from the neck, its eyes a milky white with an almost perfectly spherical mouth that was surrounded by thin tentacles. An equally long tail extended behind it, with an attached membrane that helped catch the water and propelled the creature forward in haste. Several deep wounds in its sides leaked blood into the water as it attempted to swim rapidly away.

The reason for the creature's distress soon became apparent when a rat leaped out of the pipe after it. This one was one of the larger specimens I had seen, and it was soon followed by two more of its comrades, they chased after the silver-scale and followed it into the water. Apparently they were decent swimmers, and in the silver-scale's injured state they soon overwhelmed it. They bit it multiple

times all over its body, and while it put up a decent fight (it caught one with its tentacles and took a large circular bite out of it) it soon succumbed to its wounds. Soon after the rats dragged the fresh corpse to solid ground and began feasting.

An interesting ecosystem, apparently the rats weren't just scavengers after all. I'd have to see about hunting those silver-scales myself, they didn't look too dangerous if their only defense was the mouth and tentacles.

But for now the rats were an easy target, and I could use the mass. One was already injured, and all three of them were tired from the chase and swim.

Some manner of shifting would be necessary though, having only two limbs wasn't good for a fight. My bottom half would take too long to shift, so instead I went with my head. I stored my mask and core in my torso and lengthened the jaw and tongue, the tongue would act as a prehensile appendage for now.

Wrapping my tongue around the handle of my knife, I checked around the corner again. The rats were still there and oblivious to my presence, gorging themselves on the silver-scale's body. I took the opportunity and charged.

The rats hadn't expected an attack right after downing their prey, and I was already on the first one when the others tried to chitter a warning. I stabbed the first one's neck with my knife, but only caused a shallow wound. My tongue was not the best for thrusting a weapon.

The other rats charged me and soon I had three of them taking small bites out of me. My one good advantage was that most of the muscle in my arms were intact and when I landed a blow I tore shreds of flesh from the rats. They reciprocated with bites and scratches, but unlike them I did not suffer blood loss as badly, my wounds coagulating immediately. The rat I had stabbed in the neck was the first to succumb to blood loss, and rather than continue to fight the two survivors ran, surrendering the silver-scale kill to me. I didn't bother to chase them.

The silver-scale was interesting, it was completely adapted to life in the narrow and watery tunnels. Nearly blind due to a lack of light, it probably used the tentacles like whiskers. Strangest of all was its mouth, it had teeth, but if I was analyzing its anatomy correctly it used the mouth more for scraping or scouring. What kind of organism required that kind of structure? Best I could figure it would latch onto something and bite, but wouldn't most things fight back? Odd.

Skreeek-ke-ke

My head jerked up at the sound, it came from the large pipe and I immediately spotted the two rats I had chased away at the entrance. Both were still bloody from our fight, but behind them were two more rats. Four of them now. Not the worst, at least with two injured, but-

Skreek-ke-ke

Two more emerged from a smaller pipe farther down the tunnel. Then two more. And another. Each was a large rat.

Estimated threat: High.

This wasn't good, not at all.

SKREEEEEEEEEEKEKE

The next screech echoed down the sewers, coming not from a pipe but one of the canal tunnels. Around the corner emerged another rat.

If it even was a rat, it was *MASSIVE!* Easily an equal to the deceased anomalous yellow-fur. Its fur was patchy, and its skin gnarled and scarred from many survived confrontations. Its eyes were the same milky white as the silver-scale's, but with the way it focused them on me I was certain it could still see.

Estimated threat: Extreme.

SKREEEEEEEEEEEKKK

I ran for it, the rats flooding out of tunnels behind me to give chase.

Left, right, straight, I was forced to simply run as fast as I could down the canal tunnels. Several times rats jumped from adjacent pipes, or came from side tunnels in attempts to cut me off. I desperately wanted to find an access ladder, but every time I found one the rats had already formed a barricade using their bodies.

SKREEEEEEEEEEEEKKK-KE-KE

And the giant rat was still behind me. Luckily it wasn't as fast as the yellow fur had been, but the normal rats were fast enough to run ahead of it, and every now and then I had to throw one off which allowed the massive one to catch up again.

Left, straight, left, punch a rat that jumped from an overhead pipe.

Right, straight, straight, grab a rat that caught up and fling it into the water.

The rats were herding me, and I was quickly running out of options. While a rough count put the rats at only thirty to forty individuals they knew the tunnels better than me, and were using that knowledge to cut me off from any tunnel that promised to give open running ground or a possible escape hatch.

I approached an intersection where the rats had barricaded both the straight and left options, leaving the right path free. I wasn't falling for it. Unlike before I saw light at the end of the straight tunnel, a faint glimmer at the end of the tunnel that pierced the darkness, and the rats had spread themselves just a bit too thin in order to block off both options. I made as if to turn into the right tunnel, but at the last moment charged the rats ahead of me. They had already begun moving to follow me and were now out of position, allowing me to jump past them, one arm actually pressing down onto a rat in order to vault the blockade. The rats quickly realized their error and gave chase, their clacking claws and chittering squeaks making a terrible racket in the tunnel behind me.

A few dozen more feet and I managed to reach the light, finding it to be a series of artificial lights that were strung across the ceiling. They seemed crude and somewhat make-shift, but hopefully I was nearing a drone populated area where there would be some kind of defenses from the rats, or at least other targets to distract the rats with.

But behind me I heard the screech of the rats die down. The forward runners of the swarm had backed away, refusing to cross the lighted boundary created by the artificial lights. I didn't question my good fortune and kept running. Most likely the rats had learned to avoid drone territory, its not like they would fare any better against guns and bullets. All I needed was to find an exit hatch and fix my disguise, and maybe I'd live through this.

SKREEEEEKEKEKEKEKE

Or maybe just find an exit hatch. The disguise could wait.

The massive gray rat barreled right into the light, and its bravery convinced the smaller rats to continue the hunt. At the very least I had gained some distance.

I followed the lights. They continued straight down the tunnel until they split at a T intersection, which might have once been a normal intersection except that the tunnel straight ahead had collapsed, what looked like melted stone boulders filling in the entirety of the canal and tunnel.

I was on the right side of the canal in this tunnel, so I aimed for the right pathway. Rounding the corner revealed...

A dead end. It continued about twenty feet but ended in a wall of fused and rusted piping.

I turned to go back to the left path, but was knocked off my footing by one of the forward runners. It latched to my torso and bit at my face. An unwise decision considering I was still holding the knife in my tongue, and I slashed at it in return. It was surprisingly determined, and took several gashes and a slash across an eye before it finally retreated. I let it go, hoping I wasn't too late.

But I was. The forward runners had all crowded the left pathway, and the massive rat was rounding the corner. I was trapped.

As a group the rats slowly began to move forward. Some of the smaller rats were probably hesitant (many had injuries inflicted by me during the chase), but the large one was just taking its time, it knew I was trapped.

The swarm herded me deeper into the dead end. I wasn't going to be able to break through the mass of rats, and there weren't any pipes big enough to escape into. Transferring my knife into one of my stronger arms I prepared to put my back to a corner and simply defend, already my skin was growing thicker as I sacrificed reflexes and flexibility to try and toughen my skin enough to resist the rats' claws and teeth.

I doubted it would do much against the massive one though.

I kept backing up. One rat got too close and I swiped at it. It flinched back, but the horde kept advancing. Until the last rat entered the tunnel fully.

Then there was motion behind the swarm of rats. The blocked tunnel was shifting, rocks and boulders moving from their positions in concert.

Silently.

The swarm didn't notice until the first one of them died squealing.

Skree-ks-h

Heads swiveled as the rats looked to see what had happened, and were greeted by the sight of a rat being torn in half by what appeared to be moving rocks? No, not rocks, but some kind of organism whose carapace blended into the tunnel. The same gray color as the tunnel walls, without the artificial lighting it would have been nearly invisible in the gloomy tunnels. It had two large claws that gripped the halves of the rat it just killed, and from what I could see a long segmented body supported by multiple pairs of multi-jointed, chitin-covered legs. Between the two large claws I could barely make out a multi-eyed head with only a pair of clawed mandibles for a face. It dropped the rat it had killed and swiped out with a claw, grabbing another one, a simple twist and flick had the rat neatly bisected and it reached again for a third one.

SKREEEEEEKKEKEKEEE

The massive rat screeched and the swarm attacked. They threw themselves at the creature and died in droves, the press of bodies actually working to their disadvantage. The creature's claws were large and bulky, perfect for blocking the tunnel, but they were also fast, and single sweeps would crush, slice, and block multiple rats from reaching it. It had blocked the swarm from the intersection and was using the same tactic they had just tried to use on me, turning the dead end tunnel into a killing floor. A perfect design and strategy for the tunnels it lived in.

I would have been more impressed if I wasn't also caught in the trap.

It continued to kill the rats, one of its swipes actually killing four rats at once as it simultaneously sliced through one, grabbed a second, and crushed the final two under the weight of the claw. Then the massive rat finally entered the fray.

SKREEEEEEKKKEKEKE

It waited for the swing of the gray-claw's arm and charged, biting onto the arm behind the claw where a wrist would normally be on a drone. Its grapple allowed for multiple rats to finally break past the gray-claw's defense, although several of them were grabbed and killed by the mandibles.

CRUNCH

The massive rat's jaws were stronger than I had anticipated, the crunch was the sound of the gray-claw's chitin covered arm shattering as the massive rat's bite managed to shear through the material. The right claw of the gray-claw fell to the floor, and with half of its defenses gone it was soon swarmed by the smaller rats. They attacked its legs, face, and head, but it powered through the onslaught, swinging its remaining claw into the massive rat and pinning it to the floor.

Then it spat a green substance from its mouth right into the massive rat's face. A sizzling sound accompanied the massive rat's screams as it thrashed in agony, the substance quickly eating through the rat's face and dissolving its head in seconds.

Hearing their leader scream and die must have demoralized the remaining rats, because their assault on the gray-claw suddenly became a mad free-for-all as they scattered to try and make it past the gray-claw to freedom. A few did, but mostly they died as it continued to mop up the few survivors.

And then I was alone with it.

Its left claw was held high in preparation to swing at any rats that were left, its multiple eyes scanning the tunnel past the pile of dead rats.

And then it saw me and froze.

We stared at each other for long moments. Me, desperately trying to figure out the best method to survive. It, probably wondering if I was

food like the rats.

More moments passed until:

"Hello?"

What!?

"Can you speak? Are... are you still human?"

The voice was coming from somewhere behind the gray-claw, it sounded like a 'she' drone. Was someone commanding the gray-claw?

I flooded my jaw with micro units and hurried to shift my mouth enough to reply.

"Y-yesh, Ii em huu-mon," was the best I could say with my tongue still swollen into an appendage.

"Ah..." came the voice. "...you should wear your armbands. Almost thought you were a monster."

Suddenly the gray-claw moved, not towards me but backwards, its many legs scrabbling to reverse itself back into the tunnel it had come from. It pulled the massive dead rat with it as it did so.

There was no one else in the tunnel. Was... was the gray-claw actually the drone I heard?

My mind was a list of questions. I hadn't known that drones came in a non-biped design, and this one was a massive divergence from even the other combat drones. Was it made specifically to sweep the sewers? What was its faction? Did it even have a faction? There was a good possibility this was another escaped bio-weapon as well. It hadn't attacked me, maybe I could get more information about the drones from it?

I slowly bypassed the heaps of rat corpses and walked back to the intersection. The gray-claw was currently sitting in the entrance to its tunnel, and slowly cutting small chunks off the massive rat corpse before eating them one by one.

"Um-"

"The exit is that way," it interrupted and pointed down the tunnel I hadn't chosen. "Make a right at the first intersection and the ladder is right there."

Useful to know, but I didn't want to leave just yet.

"My name is Tofu."

"Good for you. Now get going, I'm trying to eat here."

"I don't need to go right away," I replied. I really wanted to ask it questions.

I heard a sigh, followed by "Yes, you kinda do. Its too dangerous for a small fry like you to be down here."

"I'll be fine."

"Pfft, you look like you fell out of a wood chipper. You're just lucky I was here to save you."

"Well, true, you did save me. But this isn't from the rats, er, most of it isn't. I was in a fight and got knocked into the sewers. It was just unfortunate that I ran into the rats right after."

The gray-claw stared at me silently. Then in a much more concerned tone of voice it spoke.

"...Wait. You mean ***all*** those wounds are recent? Jesus how are you... your legs... and you already have mutations... you need medical assistance. Like, immediately."

"No worries, I feel fine. And I'm not bleeding out or anything."

"Of course you feel fine idiot! Did you hit your head? You're mutating!" yelled the gray-claw.

I flinched back at its yell. Then I asked, "Mutating?"

"Yes! God, maybe you're in shock. I'm sorry for yelling, but you need to reach a doctor before it gets any worse. It's going pretty slowly at least, your benedicci must be strong, you might have time... tell me, do you feel confused and hungry?"

"Yes to both of those."

"Damn, here."

The gray-claw began cutting off smaller chunks of the rat, creating a small pile of meat in front of me.

"Here, eat this. I know its disgusting but you need nutrition right now. Eat and wait for me here, I'll be right back," then it withdrew farther into its den.

Now I was really confused. At first it had wanted me to leave, but now it wanted me to stay and eat? And it seemed very concerned about this 'mutating'. It was probably related to the 'mutavus' everyone talked about. Maybe I should just ask it directly what mutavus and benedicci are, I was tired of not understanding when drones talked about it. The only reason I hadn't already asked a drone was because every drone already seemed informed, and I didn't want

to draw attention to myself for not knowing.

I ate my little meat pile (it didn't taste that bad?) while I heard clattering and banging from inside the gray-claw's den. Along with muffled yells of "Where are they?" and "Where did I put them?"

I finished my meat pile, and was considering eating more of the rat, when the gray-claw emerged from its den holding a pair of the yellow armbands in its mandible claws. It threw them to me and said,

"Here, put these on, do you have a cell-phone by any chance?"

"No."

"Yeah, I guess that was too much to hope for. Here," It withdrew into its den again and came back out with a 'cell-phone' clutched in a mandible claw. I was a bit apprehensive to get close to it (the images of crushed rats were still vividly in my mind), but it hadn't been hostile so far, so I gingerly took the cell-phone from its outstretched mandible.

"When you get to the surface call nine-one-one. Tell them you're mutating rapidly and you need help. Do you think you can climb a ladder without dropping it?"

"Yes, no problem."

"Alright, get going."

"Um, actually I wanted to ask you some questions before I left."

"You don't have time for that. You need to get going."

"But-"

Suddenly it raised its remaining claw and with a thundering crash smashed it into the ground.

"YOU DON"T HAVE TIME FOR THAT!" it screamed.

I had leapt away when it smashed the floor, but when it didn't follow I turned to look at it again. It was quivering a bit, and I got the impression that it was quite angry with me. Slowly it calmed down, and a few moments of silence passed before it sighed and said,

"Look, you need to get going. Before, before..."

"Before what?"

"...before you end up like me," it finished, barely loud enough for me to hear.

How odd. Why would being an apex predator be bad?

"You never told me your name by the way," I said.

"Pfft, it's Nicole. Try not to break my phone would you?"

"I won't. See you later."

"Yeah, sure, later."

I found the exit hatch easily enough. Fixing up my disguise took a while, but soon I had all my organs and appendages back in place, even if I was over a hundred pounds lighter. I needed to research mutavus and benedicci before I visited Nicole again, I wanted to ask her more questions and I might need to adjust my disguise again to not tip her off. If she wasn't actually a bio-weapon then I couldn't reveal to her that I was.

Placing my mask back in place I was greeted by a floating message in my vision:

"Yo Tofu, you alive?" -Imp

I must have missed the message while I was running from the rats, that's probably one of the reasons they said not to take the mask off.

Oops.

Side Dish #2

Odd Summer. A somewhat innocuous name for what is one of the worst disasters to ever befall our beleaguered planet. Named after the phenomenon's tendency to only occur during the summer months, the phenomenon again reinforces its moniker by occurring on a schedule based on odd numbers. Specifically, events occur between one, three, five, seven, and in one recorded instance, nine years apart. Which number of years is next in the cycle is apparently random. The cause of this event is unknown. Whether it is a natural occurrence or artificial in nature is unknown. Whether the event is preventable or will ever stop is, unfortunately, unknown.

What *is* known is the effect the phenomenon has on the fauna of Earth. During an Odd Summer specific individuals of all species, from the smallest insect to the largest whale, have displayed the ability to suddenly manifest extra-normal abilities. When this occurs in a human we refer to these abilities as super powers. Flying, breathing water, lifting a simple pencil with your mind or holding a bolt of lightning as if it were a walking stick, these super powers run the gamut of human imagination. But despite the ability to hold perhaps the literal power of gods in their hands, I posit that no power held by any organism, animal or human, has ever had a more lasting impact on this planet than that given to the smallest of all, the microorganisms of earth.

Specifically, the symbiotic bacteria *Pseudomonia benedicci*, commonly known as Benedicci, and the more aggressive, yet still symbiotic, virus named *Coactus mutavus*, commonly known as Mutavus.

-Opening to A Thesis on Post-Odd Summer

Villains:

The garage was bustling with activity, minions going to and fro. Several trucks were being offloaded, and the veteran minions were showing the newbies where all the stolen merchandise went, and how to repack the gear they used. Everyone that went on the mission had returned minus Tofu, a fact which had surprised Imp. Normally they lost a few of the black masks on the training run, mostly to arrests, but sometimes there was an unfortunate death if a security guard got overeager, or if the job involved rival gangs and villains. Truthfully this job had gone off a bit too cleanly, which was good, but it made Imp feel somewhat paranoid. It was rare to have such a clean victory when heroes showed up.

Imps musings were interrupted when his cell phone went off with a distinctive ring-tone. He raised his hand to his head, cell-phone already in it thanks to his power, and answered the call.

“Hey boss,” said Imp.

“How is she? How’d she do?” asked Hellion.

“Plan went fine, the team did great, thanks for asking.”

“Imp!”

“She’s fine Hellion, it was a pretty standard run, things went better than expected considering a hero turned up.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. I should be back in about thirty to forty minutes depending on how long this takes to wrap up.”

“Wait, you mean you’re still over there? Having trouble?”

“Oh please. A few new faces showed up so I’ve been scoping them out. We’ll go over the report when I get back,” and with an abrupt **click** the line went dead.

Imp sighed. Sometimes he felt like his job was actually cat herding. Except the cats were tigers, and sometimes they breathed fire.

Imp walked around the garage making sure things went smoothly, giving advice to newbies, informing the other lieutenants about Hellion’s status, and getting the report from the driver of truck one. Apparently Magenta had showed up and Tofu baited her away? Imp winced internally, if Magenta caught him they’d be scraping him off the pavement, and Magenta was tenacious. The newbies always made mistakes like that, stupid kid should’ve just surrendered and let the lawyers handle it.

Imp sent a message to Tofu’s mask, but when a minute went by without a reply it was as good a confirmation as any that things had

not gone well. He'd have to remember to send a get well card to the hospital room, regen or no it'd be a long stay considering Magenta's track record, and the kid *had* bought enough time for the truck to get away. Results mattered.

Minutes went by and eventually Imp began making his way to Hellion's office. Sandra and Viper were already there when he arrived, Viper nose deep in her phone as per usual.

"Hello Imp, glad to see you back in one piece. Lily tells me you had some excitement," said Sandra.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," replied Imp.

Viper snorted, "Did you even manage to hit him with those pea-shooters?"

"Hey, don't dis the revolvers. I'm pretty sure I hit him around ten times at least."

This time Sandra snorted.

"Er, maybe more like five… okay twice," amended Imp. Both ladies chuckled this time.

They continued to chat about the night's events, eventually being joined by Rattleback, who had a few choice words for the amount of

ammo Imp wasted trying to shoot a speedster.

“They don’t grow on trees Imp.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Jabs were tossed about in a friendly manner, jokes were made, chit chat continued, right up until a secret door clicked at the back of the office.

With a hiss the wall panel slid open. Out stepped the shadow of a man, or a man shaped shadow, it was difficult to tell which. It was somewhat possible to tell that he wore his own skull mask, similar to Imp’s, this one etched to intensify the impression of a human skull. He quickly scanned the room, noting each person in it with the intensity of a trained combatant.

“Come on Smoke, move it.”

Suddenly the shadowy man was shoved to the side. From behind him appeared a woman in what had once been an armored crimson bodysuit, but which was now almost completely black from multiple blasts and burns. In some places the suit still smoked, evidence of the firefight it had just been through. On her head she wore a red mask similar to Imp’s, but with a much grander pair of horns that rose from the temples and swept back over her head, and instead of being opaque the face plate was completely transparent, with only a golden tinge to tell it apart from normal glass or plastics. After all, she had no reason to hide her face.

She was Hellion. The infamous Queen of E13.

“Hey Hellion, how’d it go with the Espada?” said Imp.

“Those bozos? Who cares? How’d my baby do? Tell me everything,” said Hellion as she plopped down in her office chair and released the locks on her mask, tossing it over her shoulder only for Smoke to catch it before it could impact the wall. Contrary to what one might expect from the pyrokinetic she did not have red hair, instead a curly-brown mop of shoulder-length hair flopped out from under the helm.

“Ms. Hellion, need I remind you that your promise to not interfere also extends to those times when she is not around?” chastised Sandra.

“Fine fine, you party pooper. Rattleback would you start us off?”

“Sure, overall the operation was a complete success. Teams one through four managed to accomplish all mission goals, with only team three having trouble when a vigilante showed up. There were a couple minor injuries, but powered minions on site managed to apprehend him, and his identity and information were recorded before they left him tied up at the scene. The encounter appears to have been a random patrol by the vigilante, and there is no evidence to suggest the vigilante was tipped off to the operation.”

“Huh, haven’t seen one of those in a while. Was he any good?”

“Apparently he was a decent fighter, but he didn’t have a power, and no tech backing from the looks of it,” answered Rattleback.

“Pity, haven’t had a good vigilante in this sector since, um, what was his name? The guy with the wolf mask?”

“Lycanthorp?” supplied Sandra.

“That’s the one! Now that guy was fun.”

“Ehhhh…” said several people around the table. Lycanthorp had had a tendency to use tripwire traps, the kind that exploded into a myriad of “interesting” effects. Many a minion had breathed a sigh of relief when he disappeared.

“Soooo anyways, how’d the training run go?” asked Hellion as she leaned forward eagerly.

“We had some trouble, but none from the minions surprisingly,” answered Imp. “It helped that Olson already knew the drill. Ifrit did well, followed orders to the letter and remembered her training.”

“Ha, that’s my girl,” interjected Hellion.

“Anyways, Gregor seems like the level-headed sort. He followed orders, asked relevant questions, and wasn’t bothered when asked to play the part of big bad mutant, otherwise not much to say about the guy. I’m for keeping him on, what do you guys think?” Imp asked, directing his question to the other lieutenants.

“No problems with his interview. I’ve already explained the legal risks to him since he can’t really hide his identity,” said Sandra.

“His background checks out,” said Viper. “Mutated a year ago after a mugging gone wrong. Subsequently laid off, reason given as ‘company downsizing’, and moved to east sector looking for work. One of our recruiters approached him at the unemployment office.”

“Well then, seems he’s a keeper. You can go ahead and finalize his papers Sandra,” said Hellion. Sandra nodded and shuffled some of the files she had with her into a pile.

Imp continued, “And lastly we have Tofu, kid put up a good showing. Turbo roughed up the truck he was in and he not only kept his focus on getting the truck out, but also managed to injure the guy.”

“Wait, the shrimp hit Turbo?” asked Viper incredulously.

“Yep, wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself, that little stunt is what let me drive the hero off. Unfortunately it was also Tofu’s truck that ran into Magenta and he tried to bait her away, dude has no luck. I sent a message to see if he got out, but I didn’t get a reply back, so if we want to keep him on we’ll probably have to extract him legally. Over-all I’d say he’s fine for a rookie, no

problems on my end."

"Unfortunately there is a problem on mine," said Viper. "Dude's a complete ghost. No school records, no social media presence, plenty of missing person reports that match his description, but then there always are. Literally the only evidence we have that he existed before he walked into the interview is Jasper's testimony, and the fact that Tofu brought in a friend of his for an interview as well, a Michael Chavez. Even then, both Jasper and Michael claim to have never seen the kid before this week. It wouldn't really be a problem except Adder says he's definitely had plenty of combat experience, mostly the back alley kind. I'd say the shrimp is a mole if it weren't for the fact no one would make it this obvious."

"Hmm, how was his interview?" asked Hellion.

"It went well actually," replied Sandra. "He didn't tell any lies, so at the very least he's not associated with Central. The only odd point was that I needed to explain quite a few terms to him, I think his education is somewhat incomplete."

"Maybe he is a villain's kid? Homeschooled as it were?" chimed in Rattleback.

"Hah, would be kinda funny if we had two villain's kids in the same batch," said Imp.

"Hmmm…" Hellion tapped her gauntleted fingers on the desk in a rhythmic staccato. "It's a bit odd that Turbo made a straight dash from the Espada fight right to the training team. Sandra are you sure

there's no chance Tofu is a plant for the heroes?"

"Absolutely. I was able to ask him several important questions so I got a good read on him. If he's associated with anyone it's not the heroes."

"Alright then. We'll keep him on for now, but keep an eye on him. I don't need an angry villain showing up and causing a ruckus because we've let their kid get hurt."

"Like you would do?" said Imp with a chuckle.

"Hush you."

"Um, it might be too late for that," said Viper suddenly. She was looking at her phone with wide eyes. "Found some footage from tonight that's already making the rounds."

She tapped her phone a few times and then turned it to show the whole group. It was some shaky video, obviously filmed from someone's phone, but you could still easily make out the purplish form of Magenta fighting what appeared to be a mutated human in a mask. The fight was quick, only a few blows being traded before Magenta had her opponent subdued. You could almost hear them talking, but the recording wasn't high enough quality to make out what they were saying.

And then the mutant split in half in a spray of gore.

…

“Holy-”

Heroes:

“-Christ on a cracker Magenta.”

“Brick, I swear I didn’t do that! I don’t know what happened, he just fell apart!”

This had not been a good night. Brick’s team hadn’t been able to stop Hellion or her associates from tearing into the Espada gang members after the initial explosion. Turbo had run off alone at some point in the fight and somehow managed to get himself injured, forcing Brick to send Magenta after him, a decision that had now backfired massively. The only good part was that one of the heroes to show up from the nearby sectors had been Hydrox, a relatively new hero with hydrokinesis who had managed to put out most of the fires pretty quickly. Brick and Magenta were now in an emergency meeting with Jerry, their liaison to Central, and he had just finished showing them the video that was already trending on local media.

Brick sighed, “Alright Jerry, how bad is this?”

“It looks worse than it actually is, but as you know appearance matters,” answered Jerry. “Magenta’s headcam confirms her version of events, the culprit threatened to harm civilians, Magenta caught him, and then he bursts like a ripe melon for no apparent reason.”

Magenta shuddered at the imagery. None of the viscera had dripped past her forcefield, but she still felt like she needed a dozen hot showers before she’d feel clean again.

Jerry continued, “Forensics at the scene confirmed that something fishy happened. The bottom half of the perpetrator apparently “dissolved into dust and sludge” once separated from the rest of him, and upon an examination of the sewer a similar residue was found, but not enough to account for the rest of him. It looks like he pulled a disappearing act. Considering he also didn’t look very human while fighting we’re currently thinking it’s some kind of sandman-like or other shapeshifting power. The good news Magenta is this clears you of any fault, and your probation isn’t currently at risk.”

Magenta breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing that.

“What’s the bad news?” asked Brick.

“Well the public isn’t taking the footage too well. Despite all the facts the video still looks like Magenta ripped some mutant in half. Public opinion seems split between those claiming hero brutality and those claiming the culprit deserved worse. We’ll be releasing information to try and quell the worst of it, but it'll be a rocky road before it calms down. I’ve got the reports on what's being said right here.”

“I’m sorry Brick,” said Magenta.

“Not your fault Magenta, you played by the book on this one. Why don’t you hit the hay? I’ll finish up here.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, you look like hell and we don’t both need to sift through a bunch of hate mail.”

“Thanks Brick.”

Magenta trudged to the door and left, her shoulders noticeably lower than they had been that morning. Brick waited for her footsteps to fade away before he turned back to Jerry.

“How bad is it really?”

Jerry frowned and leaned back in his chair, running his hand through his wispy hair in a tired gesture before he responded.

“Truthfully Central isn’t very worried about the video, the public will whine and moan for a while before they move on to the next outrage. The bigger concern is that Hellion’s Henchmen hit more than ten other places tonight. All large burglaries.”

Brick put his elbows on the table and rested his face in his hands.

“We’re outnumbered here Jerry.”

“And Central agrees, which is why you’ll be getting some fresh faces soon.”

“Who?”

“I’m not sure on the particulars…”

“*Who* Jerry?”

Jerry sighed before answering.

“Some new triggers who need training.”

Brick’s fist hit the table, denting the tough metal.

“*Sidekicks*? Are you serious right now Jerry? Hellion had most of her heavy hitters at that raid and apparently her goons still had enough manpower to turn away Turbo *and* Magenta. I’m not sure if you’ve noticed but they aren’t exactly lightweights themselves! We need

veterans! Not snot-nosed recruits!"

"I know! I agree with you! But the fact of the matter is I don't get to have the final word on this. With Odd Summer starting Central is being conservative. Things are tight right now."

"They're always tight."

"That's true, which is why you shouldn't snub your nose up at the help you *do* get. All of the recruits have powers Brick, they won't be useless."

"Hellion's Henchmen will eat them alive, hell E13 by itself might chew them up, you know how it gets here during Odd Summer."

"Don't be so sure, some of them are actually from E13."

Brick frowned at that.

"Isn't it policy to send sidekicks to a sector they don't have families in?"

"Normally yes, but like I said, things are tight."

"Tch."

“Besides, that policy was implemented for safety reasons, and while I hate to give credit to a villain, Hellion is actually far less brutal than most. She doesn’t go after families and she doesn’t try to kill every hero she sees. This is actually a better area than most for a new hero to start in.”

“She’s not above blackmail if she finds your identity though.”

“I’m trying to be positive Brick. Look, I know it’s not ideal. But Central has promised we’ll get all the resources we need to help train them, that includes tinker support. I’m also going to see if Hydrox would be willing to transfer from E12 to E13, give us someone who can put out fires, maybe we can trade him for one of the new recruits or something. Does that untwist your panties?

“Pffft, alright, alright. I’ll give it a chance Jerry, you’ve convinced me,” said Brick, his frown finally breaking.

“Glad you see it my way. Now, how serious were you about helping me sort through some of this hate mail?”

“Maybe next time Jerry. Rain check.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Jerry replied with a chuckle.

Brick's lightened mood lasted only until the door was closed behind him. Jerry was a good sort for a government guy. Dealt with the dreck, pulled what resources he could from stingy paper pushers, and tried to keep it all light-hearted besides. But Brick still had one more person to yell at before he could head off himself, and just thinking about it made his blood boil.

As he walked down the corridors Brick gave the impression that he was stomping without actually doing it. It couldn't be helped, he was an even seven feet tall and built like his namesake. The fact that his power had given him super strength, and hardened his skin into a rock-like substance on command had been more a formality than anything. He hadn't even realized he had a power until a week after it happened.

Brick arrived at a door marked with a red cross and knocked briefly before pushing it open. Inside he found Turbo out of costume, propped up in a hospital bed with his leg in a cast.

"Hey bossman," said Turbo.

"Hey Turbo, how's the leg?" asked Brick, taking a seat on a (reinforced) stool next to the bed.

"Could be better. Small fracture. Wouldn't have been too bad but running on it didn't help none. How'd it go with Hellion?"

"Could have been better. Other heroes finally showed up, but it definitely could have gone better if you had stuck around."

“Aw geez, I’m sorry bossman. I just got a call about the robbery and I figured helping the people there would be better than watching a bunch of villains whale on each other. I thought I could solve the problem and be back before I was missed, but one of them boneheads kicks like a mule. Bad luck, you know how it is.”

“Heh, yeah I know how it is,” said Brick, right before he grabbed Turbo’s injured leg and squeezed.

“**AHGH!** GOD! WHAT THE HELL?!”

“I ignore a lot of the stunts you pull Turbo,” said Brick, then he gave another small squeeze.

“**AHGGHHH!** Bossman! Jesus, why?!”

“I also ignore all the little side deals you run. Like taking bribes to prioritize certain crimes against certain businesses.”

“Hey, hey man I don’t- **AGH!**- alright alright!”

“Normally I’d kick you to the curb, but if you hadn’t noticed we’re kinda understaffed at the moment, and between all your side gigs you sometimes find the time to actually stop a real crime. But if you **EVER** leave me or a teammate high and dry like that again, I will break **all** your limbs and stuff you down the nearest sewer myself. Do

I make myself *clear*?"

"YES! Jesus man, crystal."

"Good," said Brick, and he finally released Turbo's leg.

Brick got up to leave, but before he reached the door he paused and turned back to Turbo.

"Oh! Almost forgot, we're going to be getting some sidekicks soon. You spend the most time on the streets, so you can guide them around E13. Show em the ropes and all that."

"Um, I'm not really much for babysittin'."

"No worries! You'll do fine. Rest up Turbo, it's going to be a busy summer."

"Wait, but-"

The door closed with a satisfying thump, and as he headed off to hit the hay himself, Brick found his mood had improved quite a bit more than he thought it would.

Ch16 They Are Made Of Meat

I want corrosive spit. That substance Nicole produced ate through the giant rat's flesh and bone in seconds. The practical applications of such a substance in combat are extensive. Outside of combat I can just use micro units to deconstruct what I want, but inside combat the micro units are simply too slow to use effectively. Plus if the signal gets interrupted (by say a thrashing opponent) then the micro units just self-destruct and it becomes a waste of resources. But a fast acting solution that can be applied *at range*? Invaluable.

Although storage is a problem. If the storage organ ruptures in a fight then you are just dousing your own insides with acid, which would be.... unpleasant. Nicole obviously stores it somehow, I'll have to ask her about it when I see her again. Maybe she'd be willing to give me a sample? Either way, I had a lot of information to compile from the night's activities.

After I left the sewer I answered the message Imp sent . A few seconds later I received instructions to head to a 'safe house', along with a small direction indicator that appeared in the corner of my vision. I began following the indicator at a fast walk, making sure to scan the sky for any signs of Magenta. Meeting her twice in one night wouldn't be pleasant, and I had already had enough potentially lethal events for today. Luckily this late at night the streets were mostly empty, and what few drones I encountered got out of my way in a hurry. The mask really was a good deterrent. Even one of the combat drones, covered in patches of chitin and spikes, crossed the street when it saw me and hurried away.

But it wasn't really a 'combat drone' now was it.

“Are you still human?” Nicole had asked me. Which implied that despite looking like a partially melted and shredded torso at the time, I had still resembled a ‘human’. And since she implied I should be wearing armbands like the drones do it appears that the name of the drone species is ‘human’. So, one mystery solved. Not even that big a secret really, the drones constantly used “hey man” as a generic greeting, *obviously* a shortened ‘slang’ version of “hello human.”

So it appears humans are not arranged into drones/combat drones/ progenitors, but instead into drones/progenitors, and due to this ‘mutavus’ the drones sometimes go through a metamorphosis of human > mutant > monster. And I wasn’t even that sure about there being progenitors anymore, it was entirely possible they made new drones in a lab similar to the test chambers. After all, most castes seemed to be determined by training and not by any biological markers. A very confusing system to decipher.

I think my confusion was understandable though. Many cycles ago (back before I received Human.exe) I had fought an interesting organism in a combat test. Unlike other organisms that worked singularly or in packs, this one worked as a massive swarm of individual drones that all served the group as a whole. They had six legs, a chitinous exoskeleton, multifaceted eyes, antenna, and were quite tiny. True, I had been small myself back then, but they still had not been a difficult opponent. I ate the first drones en-masse, and when larger, more aggressive soldier drones came I ate them as well. I followed the trail of drones all the way to the progenitor that made new drones, and then the “fight” was over. It had been an easy test, and that organism was only presented to me once, but the uniqueness of the encounter had prompted me to record the details, and when I gained Human.exe my observations of the white-coats prompted me to model them after the tiny chitin-drones. The similarities were there, after all. So, one small mystery solved.

Now the *real* mystery is why my best weapon, Human.exe, is clearly

labeled with the moniker of the most dominant and deadly species I'd come across. True, I'd never seen 'human' written before, but I'd spent nearly a week attending 'school', and that had been long enough to learn how to match letters with sounds. It couldn't be more obviously labeled, maybe it *was* actually a white-coat program? Some kind of puzzle test to see how I would react? But that didn't make sense, if it was my escape from the test chambers would have been countered in seconds, and the signal that gave me the protocol didn't match that of the white-coats anyways.

So, now my greatest weapon was a protocol of indeterminate origin, given to me for an unknown purpose, and the entire thing was so clearly labeled a single-celled organism could probably figure out the clues linking it to 'humans'.

Odd, so very odd.

While mulling over this new information I eventually reached the 'safe house', which turned out to be an apartment on the second level of a building that opened when I pressed my mask to the door. Inside was a short hallway that ended in a reinforced door.

Approaching the door a panel near the top opened, and I could see a pair of masked eyes looking out from inside.

"Name, passcode," said the voice.

"Tofu, training team, zero, four, up," I replied, stating the passcode I had been given before the mission started.

“Wow, you really did survive. Alright, one sec,” and the panel closed before the sound of a heavy bolt sliding was heard. The door opened and a minion with a black mask greeted me, extending his hand to shake mine like many humans did.

“Wow, you look pretty good for a guy that just got torn in half. You can call me Fred by the way.”

Huh?

“How did you know about that?”

“Oh dude, it’s all over the net. We’ve been watching it on repeat, Magenta’s face when she gets sprayed is priceless. Come on, some of the guys from team three are still up, I’ll introduce you.”

Fred led me into the apartment kitchen, where two more minions in black masks, and one mutant with metallic platelets imbedded in its skin and a powered minion mask, were gathered around the table. They had an assortment of colorful flat rectangles which they appeared to be arranging into specific patterns, human fondness for rectangles on full display.

“Hey guys! Guess who decided to not die!” said Fred.

“No way! For real?” said one of the black masks.

“Ha, knew it! Pay up!” said the mutant. The other minions groaned and threw money over to him. “Heh, since you survived this makes tonight’s job a hundred percent success. All targets hit, no arrests, and no fatalities. For a job this size it’s goddamn amazing. Hey Fred, wake the others. We can’t be sleeping now, we gotta celebrate!” said the mutant.

From there the minions started pulling out food and drinks, as well as rousing the others. Apparently they were part of team three, one of several of Hellion’s teams that had been working tonight. The mutant (who went by Pebbles) handed me a ‘beer’.

“Haha, this makes you an official bonehead Tofu. Drink up!”

“Bonehead?” I asked.

“It’s because of the masks,” answered Pebbles, rapping his knuckles on his own helmet. “They look sorta skullish, and some of the heroes would call us boneheads back in the early days as a joke. Name stuck, and I’ll tell you they don’t laugh at the name anymore.”

The other minions arrived, groggy and tired at first, but once they realized it was a ‘party’ and the reason for it they livened up quickly. Beer was passed out freely, and someone linked their phone to the ‘big screen’ in the apartment so they could play the footage of my fight against Magenta. It was… the only emotion that matches is ‘embarrassing’. Apparently someone had used a recording device to capture my fight with Magenta, if you could call it a fight. More like my mad scramble for freedom, but the minions cheered when I hit her with the manhole cover and laughed at the look on her face when

she got sprayed with viscera. Luckily the video didn't give away my disguise, I wasn't quite the right shape for a human in the video, but apparently being a 'regenerator' gives me a lot of leeway on how I look during a fight.

Or maybe they were just really intoxicated, they don't seem to handle certain 'alcohol' compounds very well. I wonder why they drink them then?

The party went on for a long time (I learned how to play 'cards'), only ending an hour before sunrise. Eventually the only other minion awake was Pebbles, and we were sitting at the kitchen table talking.

"Heh, that'll teach them to try and outdrink mutants," Pebbles mumbled past his beer. "Er, wait, rude to assume, sorry. I never did ask, you a mutant? Uh, wait, you don't gotta answer that. Sorry, pretty drunk."

"I don't mind… although, what would the difference be?"

"HA! Yer damn right! It doesn't make a difference! Not to Hellion at least!"

Several drones who were trying to sleep yelled at Pebbles to shut up, and he quieted, chagrinned. I decided to ask again, I wanted a real answer.

"Um, I was asking seriously."

“Mhm?”

“I mean, I’m a regenerator, but lots of mutants and supers have regeneration. Is there really a difference?”

“Ha, that’s a nice way of looking at it Tofu. But reality ain’t so pretty,” he took a sip of beer. “You can’t have both a super power and a mutation, but both give power, and if you can get power either way who would want the option that makes you half lobster or spider or whatever?”

“You can’t have both? Why is that?”

“What, you want to know, like, the actual science of it? Shit I don’t know. I didn’t pass high school you want me to explain meta-physic stuff?” he paused to take another drink, “I’ll let you in on what I *do* know though. Everyone is always hoping they get a power, and dreading getting the virus, but between you and me mutavus is probably the better outcome.”

Odd, that hadn’t been my observation at all.

“Why is that?”

He took a long swig of his beer and then leaned in towards me, speaking softly.

“My old man, now, he used to be a mean drunk. One night was worse than usual. Beat me into a bloody pulp, eyes swollen shut, face was just one large bruise, I’m sure my ribs were busted and worse. He left me on the floor with my head ringing and went to get another drink. I needed a doctor but wasn’t gonna get one. That’s when this happened.”

At this he gestured to the skin on his arm, it was thick and leathery, with the small metallic platelets interspersed to provide extra armor and reinforce the flesh.

He continued, “Mutavus saved my life. True it hasn’t been all peaches and cream since, but I never got beat half to death by my old man again. Mutavus didn’t give me amazing supernatter- supernature-*whatever* powers, but it gave me exactly what I needed. That’s the difference between the virus, and whatever cosmic monkey paw it is that hands out powers. Mutavus gives you what you **need** and not an inch more, the damn monkey gives you what you **want**, but I’ll tell you, be careful what you wish for. They can both be cruel bastards, but at least Mutavus doesn’t have a sense of humor."

Pebbles fell asleep soon after he finished his (suspect) explanation of Mutavus.

He was really drunk.

I didn’t rest very long, only until the sun rose. I had too many things

on my mind and a long list of small chores I wanted to get done today, so I made myself some coffee and a ‘bagel’ to-go before leaving the safe house. Luckily there was one of those hidden elevators so I was able to reach the main base without having to navigate above-ground.

The elevator opened and I exited into the large hallway that housed the elevator doors, hopefully I would be able to find one of the lieutenants. I wanted to pick up my payment for the job, and I wanted to ask most of them a question or two.

I reached the common room where the orientation had taken place. There were a few masked drones about, but it was still pretty empty. Luckily I spotted one of the lieutenants. Sandra was here, sitting and eating breakfast at a table. I approached and greeted her.

“Hello Sandra. I wanted to ask a few questions if you have time.”

Sandra looked at me and blinked a bit before reacting. Then she spoke.

“Tofu? I, I admit I didn’t expect to see you so soon. Imp said you responded, but I saw the footage of the fight. Are, are you feeling alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

Sandra gave me a concerned look.

“Then why are you carrying an empty coffee pot?” she asked.

“I couldn’t find a cup large enough to hold all the coffee,” I answered.

“I, I see,” she responded before giving me another look. Was my disguise incorrect? I checked it before I left.

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay then. What can I help you with this morning?

“I was wondering how to collect payment for the job?”

“Oh, we usually send out the money after everything has been tallied, that takes about a day or two. Is it urgent?”

Oh, right, the money.

“Um, yes, I could use some money. I was also wondering about the Kobe beef? Imp said we would keep some for ourselves?”

She gave me another confused look before breaking into a smile.

“We will be having a company dinner to celebrate tonight, I’ll make sure you get a portion. In the meantime I can set you up with a small cash advance until the paychecks go out. Would a chit be fine?”

“Yes, a chit would be great. Thank you Sandra.” Chits were accepted at Maggie’s.

“You’re welcome. You can pick it up in my office later. Was there anything else I can answer for you?”

“Yes, have you seen Adder or Viper? I wanted to ask them some questions too.”

“Adder is in the training room doing her morning practice. As for Lily she won’t be in for a few more hours, what did you need from her?”

“I wanted her help with a phone, I don’t know how to work it.”

“Oh, well I’m no Lily, but I’m sure I can help you with that.”

I pulled out the phone Nicole had given me. I had formed pockets in the right place just for this scenario.

“Well, I can see why you might have trouble with it, this looks like tinker tech… Tofu, you didn’t pull this off a hero did you?”

“No, it was given to me by someone I met after Magenta injured me, she let me borrow it."

“Alright, but in the future remember not to trust any tech whose source you don’t know. Especially hero tech, they *always* bug their gadgets.”

“I’ll remember.”

Sandra helped me navigate the phone interface. Apparently it wasn’t that different from a normal phone on the inside, it just looked rather patchwork on the outside.

Thump

I hit the mat again. This was starting to get rather frustrating.

> Attack pattern calculation failed.

I had headed to the training room after talking to Sandra, and there I found Adder going through a training routine. She had seemed surprised that I wanted to practice with her.

We started with ‘stretches’ (some kind of human self-assessment

procedure?) and then a light jog, but when I mentioned I wanted some combat practice Adder had been hesitant. Apparently she had seen the video of my fight with Magenta, and was worried that I was pushing myself too hard. I assured her I was fine, and after much convincing where I used most of the testing machines in the room, she agreed to spar with me.

And now I was staring up at the ceiling again. It was very odd, she wasn't stronger than me, and I was sure my reaction speed was top notch, but consistently she managed to grab and throw me. She kept disappearing right before it happened, maybe if I sped up my reaction to higher levels?... No, that would defeat the purpose of training. I wanted to improve without having to rely on burning resources.

"Giving up there champ?" she asked.

"No, just wondering how to counter your power."

"Pfft, what? Tofu I don't have a power."

"But you disappear right before you grab me? You do it consistently."

"Ah, good job rookie, you've noticed. It's not some power, I just move into the blindspot before I grab you."

"Blindspot?"

“Yeah, the eye has a small blindspot from where the optic nerve enters the eye. Your brain filters it out since there isn’t anything you can do about it, but if you know it’s there you can use it.”

Human.exe shutdown;

Checking…

Confirmed.

Restarting Human.exe;

Damn it. She was telling the truth. The human eye has a rather obvious blindspot, but I didn’t notice because Human.exe was filtering it out. It was an easy fix, but I’d have to be more careful of quirks like that in the future.

“Can you teach me how to use the blindspot?”

“Sure. But I should warn you it’s more a party trick than anything. Good for making newbies respect their sensei though,” she said with a wink.

We sparred a bit longer, and I did noticeably better, although I wasn’t quite able to knock her down. She was explaining to me the importance of proper footwork and not just being fast, when the door to the room opened and Rattleback walked in.

“Morning Adder, and is that you Tofu? I didn’t think anyone else would be up already, let alone you. Shouldn’t you be recovering?”

“Good morning Rattleback, and no worries, I’ve recovered from last night,” I answered.

“He’s doing fine Rattleback. Not everyone is afraid of the sunrise,” said Adder, grinning.

“Ha! Easy for you to say coach. Some of us actually had to work last night,” he replied.

“Excuses, excuses.”

“You weren’t at last night's job?” I asked.

“No, I don’t do the whole skulking around in dark alleys bit.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I don’t really like fighting.”

...eh?

“I don’t believe you.”

Rattleback laughed. “It’s true Tofu, she’s a terror in the ring, but she wouldn’t hurt a fly, just us poor minions.”

“I’m just trying to toughen you up. Can’t have you goons dying out there,” she said.

“Sure sure Adder. Whatever helps you sleep at night,” he replied.

Adder punched his shoulder, to which he just laughed harder (and rubbed his shoulder).

Then he continued, “Anyways Tofu, since you’re up early mind heading over to the garage? Socket saw that footage of your fight and he’s been up all night on some kind of tinker bender ever since. Let him know you’re okay would you?”

“Alright.”

As I left the room Adder and Rattleback started stretching to do their own sparring. I wasn’t sure how much I believed what they said. Would someone who was *that good* at fighting really not want to fight?

Rattleback and Adder started their spar. It was a much more even trade than any of my spars had been, but Adder still threw Rattleback

quickly.

13.4 seconds.

Huh, I guess if you didn't like fighting, becoming so good your fights were always short was a viable option.

"TOFU! THERE YA ARE! GET OVER HERE!"

As I entered the garage Socket spotted me almost immediately. He was over in a corner of the garage where multiple sturdy benches and tables were set up, most of them laden with equipment of unknown purpose, and a lot of the devices were actively running. There weren't many other minions in the garage, but what few there were gave the area a wide berth.

"COME COME TIME'S A WASTIN!" he yelled over the noise of the machines.

I wandered over while Socket shutdown enough devices that we could hear each other talk. Then he took a stool and gestured for me to sit before he started rustling through piles of what appeared to be clothes. His eyes appeared to be rather bloodshot.

"Oi, you really put a challenge to me this time boyo! Been thinking

up designs that'll fit yer bendy body all night. Here, try these on fer size," and he threw several articles of clothing at me, they resembled the suits Imp and Ifrit wore.

"Come come, they'll fit over yer weirdo skin I guarantee it. Had to spend half an hour finding a video on the net wit enough resolution to see what happened. Nice trick wit the pulling in half bit, but ya got's ta remember that clothes ain't supposed ta bleed, BUT DON'T TRY THAT SHITE AGAIN YOU HEAR ME? Just get caught next time, we pay a bloody nickel to tha damn lawyers might as well get our money's worth! Now where did I put me cold iron?"

ERROR;

Disguise compromised.

I was stunned, Socket had just casually announced that he had seen through some of my disguise. But, he was still putting together a suit for me? He didn't care? Maybe he thought it was a power...

"HURRY IT UP LAD! YA WANT THA SUIT READY FER YER NEXT FIGHT OR NOT?! AND SOMEONE GET ME MY COLD IRON!"

I spent the next hour trying different suits that Socket had made. Multiple times he yelled at a minion to get some gadget or gizmo, or threw a suit he declared a failure into a 'scrapper'. I was able to squeeze into most of the suits fine, but being full covers they restricted the movement of my limbs rather heavily. When I mentioned this he had me display some common movements, and I showed him some stretches and how I made my arms extend (but didn't tell him the extent of my shifting, I wasn't sure how much he actually knew and I wasn't going to reveal more if it wasn't

necessary), which set off another round of tests. At one point he actually wanted me to put my arm into a 'saw blade' so he could test my regeneration, but luckily a minion stopped him. I *definitely* didn't want someone with a tinker power getting a good look at the process.

Eventually Socket declared that he had collected enough data, and promptly kicked myself and the other minions he had recruited out of his section of the garage so he could "work in peace."

I made my way back to the elevators in a daze, planning to just go up to Sandra's office and collect my cash advance. At the very least I wanted to get *some* money out of this whole endeavor before I needed to disappear.

Although, Socket didn't seem too interested in digging deeper into my disguise. He had displayed a startling level of determination in getting enough info to make the suit, but once he had that any interest in my secrets ended abruptly. His obsession with solving a mechanical problem was completely overruling his decision making, and blinded him to possibly important details around him.

Baffling.

I rode the elevator up to the clothing store entrance, and put away my mask before heading next door to Sandra's office. Inside Viper was at her desk, apparently it was late enough in the morning for her to be up now. Surprisingly she looked up from her phone when I came in.

"Hey Tofu, come here. Sandra left this for you."

I approached the desk and Viper handed me a small, flat, rectangular chit.

"That's a thousand there, the rest will be when we send out payments."

"...a thousand, *dollars*?"

"No, *balloons*. Of course dollars shrimp. Don't spend it all in one place."

…

Mikey was dead asleep when his phone rang, the previous night had been long and difficult, and Turbo showing up had practically given him a heart attack. Between that and the news that Tofu had disappeared he had thought he'd never be able to sleep again, but once he was back in his home and his own bed he had promptly conked out.

And now his damn phone kept ringing.

He let it go to voicemail the first two times, but it kept ringing, and finally he admitted defeat. He grabbed his phone off the nightstand

and checked the caller I.D. It was someone named Nicole? He answered it.

“H-hello?” Mikey said groggily.

“Mikey? It’s Tofu!”

“Tofu?! Shit, what the hell happened man? The lieutenants said you disappeared! Do you need help?”

“No, Magenta tore me in half and some rats almost killed me, but I’m fine now.”

“WHAT?!”

“Anyways can you meet me at Maggie’s Diner? Bring Tim, and no worries I’m paying. I have money now!”

“Wait, what, what was that about rats?”

“I’ll explain later. Gotta go! Bye!” ***click,*** and the line went dead.

…

“What the fuck?!”

Ch17 All Part of a Balanced Breakfast

The bus arrived and I hung up on Mikey to concentrate on what I was doing. The fact that a bus ride cost as much as a subway ticket meant I hadn't bothered ever using one before, I hadn't wanted to waste money on something that wasn't food, and normally I could just walk since the distances were usually quite manageable. But, with a thousand dollars now in my possession I decided to splurge, if only for the experience of riding the public bus.

Besides, I wanted to get there faster.

It was interesting. The interior was designed to be easy to stand in when the seats were full, much like the subway on a smaller scale. Several seats were reserved for humans that needed more room, such as mutants, or caretakers with 'children'. I got to see a 'child' up close for the first time when a caretaker sat in the seat in front of me. Infant humans are… unimpressive. It gazed around uncomprehendingly, made incomprehensible noises, and drooled an inordinate amount of liquid onto its surroundings. Perhaps it wasn't truly sentient yet? If that was the case then maybe in a sense it actually was impressive. Sandra's requirement for being a minion had been eighteen cycles, which meant that in just about three weeks this drooling larva would be a fully functioning human, if inexperienced. I myself had been alive much longer and I still needed Human.exe to get anywhere close to what could be considered a passable human.

The bus let me out about a block from Maggie's, and I hurried over. If I was right then it should be just before the lunch rush. Pushing open the door the little alarm rang, and the smells of cooking food magnified. The waitress from last time approached me and I asked for a booth since I was expecting Mikey and Tim to arrive eventually. Then she asked if I wanted anything to start with.

Yes. Yes I did.

I started with a number one (tofu burger), number two (pancakes with hashbrowns), a number three (grilled cheese with fried tomato

slices), and a number four (blueberry biscuits with butter and a side of fruit). My plan was to work my way down as much of the menu as possible before Mikey brought Tim over. The waitress gave me a suspicious look and asked if I had a chit, which I passed over for her to use on the machine before she gave it back to me. Apparently large orders needed to be paid in advance, which makes sense to me.

I finished the first four items and began ordering more. It was interesting to see that the cost of each dish was not in direct proportion to the resources I obtained from them. Instead the cost seemed to be in proportion to what the dish was made from, with ‘fresh fruit' being more expensive than items like pancakes, and meat being the most expensive of all. The only two items on the menu that contained real meat (number twelve: two eggs with a choice of two bacon strips or sausage links, and number thirteen: chili and beans) were easily twice the cost of anything else on the menu. It was strange, but it made sense. Since literally *everything* the humans ate was either nutrient or energy rich, prices probably reflected the difficulty of obtaining the ingredients rather than the value of the finished product. Meat was self-explanatory, nothing liked being eaten, and if the rats and yellow-fur were any indication obtaining meat was likely a very risky proposition.

What really confused me was the fresh fruit. It was also meat from an organism of some kind, but unlike what I was used to it seemed… grown to be eaten? My biggest clue came from a small, green piece of organic tissue attached to a ‘strawberry’. I deconstructed it carefully and found it was a respiratory organ. From what I could tell it used a process nearly the opposite of the human respiratory cycle, so at least now I knew what filtered the air and kept it at a stable mixture.

The process would pull mass from the air and stockpile energy in an efficient way (much more efficient than it would be to use micro units to pull mass from the air), but it was slow, and didn’t provide a lot of energy. It was useful to know I guess, but not worth doing when food was so readily available. Maybe the fruit was some kind of lure in order to attract prey and allow the organism to not move? I hadn’t seen any organisms that might match such a description yet… oh well, another mystery to be solved later. I was accumulating a lot of those.

Mikey walked into the diner while I was eating another number twelve (bacon and eggs is delicious), and I waved at him to catch his attention. Today he was wearing a black jacket and had his long hair tied back. He looked a bit frazzled, and Tim wasn't with him.

"Hey Tofu," he greeted me.

"Hello Mikey, are you alright? And where is Tim?"

"Oh, yeah I'm fine man, it was just a later night than I'm used to. I told Tim to meet us here a bit later, wanted to talk to you about the job first. You can't just drop bombs like that Magenta comment and leave me hanging man! Spill, what happened out there?"

Over the next half hour I explained what had happened after Turbo attacked the truck. Mikey ordered a burger while he listened, and when I described my fight with Magenta he pulled out his phone to find the video in question. I might need to get myself a permanent phone later, they seemed like excellent communication tools if the humans were sharing the fight footage so quickly.

"So. Split in half. Chased by rats. Scorpion chick. That about sum things up?" Mikey asked when I finished retelling events.

"Do scorpions have large claws and chitin exoskeletons?"

"Yeah, and well, lobsters and crabs and stuff as well I guess."

"I'll ask her which one next time I see her."

"Ack! Don't do that! I dunno about her, but the mutant kids at school always got pissed off if you asked *what* they were."

"Oh." I definitely wasn't doing that then.

“Anyways…” Mikey fell silent, before saying, “So like, you actually do have a real power right? I’ve never heard of a mutation that lets you do all that stuff. At least, not while still letting you look normal.”

…Mikey is too perceptive sometimes.

“I mean, it’s cool man. I get that you wouldn’t wanna blab about it to everyone. I won’t tell, promise.”

“...Thank you Mikey.”

We sat in silence for a bit, just nibbling on our food. Then Mikey spoke again, “Sooooo… what is your power then?”

“Eh?”

“Come on, we're friends, you can tell me. Or wait! Don’t tell me, let me try to guess it,” said Mikey with grin.

“Mikey I’d rather n-”

“Let’s see, you can regen.”

“Lots of C’s can-”

“You can stretch your arms.”

“That’s just a quirk of-”

“You held the knife with your tongue you said?”

“I shouldn’t have mentioned th-”

“Soooooo I’m gonna guess shapeshifter?”

...what?

What?

WHAT!?

Shapeshifter is an **actual** power humans can have? This whole time I could have just said “Shapeshifter” and no one would have questioned further? How, how....

Aggravating.

“Yo, earth to Tofu, you there? Did I like, actually guess it?” asked Mikey.

“...Yes.”

“Oh shit, really?”

“Yes?”

“Heh, sorry man I was just trying to tease you a bit. But a shapeshifter power! That’s really cool.”

“It is?”

“Yeah man, being able to be whatever you want sounds amazing,” then he leaned in and grinned at me again, “Is that why you’re so defensive? You’re actually an old neckbeard under there?”

“No, this is how I normally look.”

“Uh huh, sure it is.”

"Yes?"

"Methinks that thou protests too much."

We talked a bit more, Mikey mostly ‘teasing’ that I was different human types, such as an ‘old man’ or ‘little girl’, but he also promised to "stay mum" about my power to others.

Not me though. I was going to leak the “fact” that I was a shapeshifter to anyone who would listen. I should have suspected there was a power that could replicate my abilities much earlier (it even had a name!). It explained why Socket hadn’t cared that much when he noticed.

Finally Mikey interrupted the teasing and looked over at the entrance to the diner.

“There’s Tim, about time… oh god, this again.”

Tim entered the diner, he was wearing blue ‘jeans’ and a shirt that had the Guardian's emblem on it, as well as carrying a really large canvas bag that appeared to be quite heavy. We waved to direct him over to our table, and he wandered over before he dropped his bag on the floor with a **thump** and took a seat.

“Hey guys,” said Tim.

“Hello Tim,” I replied.

“Hey Tim, you still trying then?” asked Mikey.

“Damn right I am, who knows when the next one will happen?”

“Trying what?” I asked.

“Getting a power man! Duh,” answered Tim.

“Tim’s been trying to get a power every Odd Summer since we were ten years old,” Mikey explained. “Although his methods are somewhat questionable.”

Wait, ten **years** old?

Recalculating;

Main growth phase of human estimated at 18-22 years.

Danger:

Age requirement to be a minion: 18 cycles years.

Somewhat annoying. I find out I don't have to hide my ability, and discover I need to hide my age.

"Hey, the car battery thing was a fluke," continued Tim, while he pulled out several different devices from the bag, along with what I recognized from Socket's garage to be a 'screwdriver'. I leaned in, interested in his process.

"And these devices will help you gain a power?" I asked.

"Or get him killed," Mikey interjected.

"Don't listen to this Gloomy Gus," Tim said as he started to unscrew the casing on an unidentified device. "Statistics show that what you are doing when you trigger matters. If you're fighting some monster you get a physical power like super strength, if you are in a stressy mental situation like being lost in the tunnels you'll probably get a mental power. I'm trying to get a tinker power, so I'm trying to assemble as many devices as I can while Odd Summer is in effect. It's a matter of probability."

"Interesting."

"Don't encourage him Tofu," said Mikey. "Tim, has it occured to you that powers might be completely random, and it's just that the guy in a monster fight who gets a tinker power doesn't live to tell about it?"

"Details, details," said Tim, as he continued to disassemble the device and began to switch out pieces.

Mikey just rolled his eyes. After 'hanging out' with Tim and Mikey

multiple times over the past week I was rather used to their bickering. Tim was always enthusiastic about heroes and powers, and Mikey tended to focus more on “the reality of the situation” as he put it. Despite this it seemed they were good ‘friends’.

Tim ordered a burger (after I told him I was paying since his hero information had helped me win a ‘bet’ at work) and showed me some of the devices he was working on. They were “simple things” (his words) such as a small ‘flashlight’, a ‘calculator’, and a ‘clock’. I showed him Nicole’s phone while we were on the topic of devices, and he got really excited to see someone else’s handmade work, although I had to explain that it was borrowed from a co-worker, and he couldn’t look “under the hood.” Then Tim told me that he knew a place that sold phones for cheap if I wanted one myself, and I told him I’d think about it (phones were apparently expensive, I could buy so much more food). We decided to head to the arcade after lunch, and I went to the counter to pay the rest of the bill, while Tim and Mikey packed up Tim’s devices.

I went to the ‘cash register’ and rang the little bell to get service like I had seen other humans do. To my surprise instead of the waitress, Maggie popped out of the back room and approached the register.

“Hello Maggie, I’d like to pay the bill.”

“Of course, cash or chit… wait, weren’t you the boy who came in with Jasper?”

“Yes. That was me.”

“Well I’ll be, you’re still around then? How’ve you been hun? Jasper didn’t lead you down the wrong hole somewhere did he?”

“No, his information was quite accurate. It got me a job.”

She gave me a concerned look before leaning in and whispering. “Is it a legitimate job? Everything, y’know, legal?”

“I had to sign legal papers to get it?” She looked very relieved at my statement.

“Well, that’s a relief. And I guess it pays well huh? You boys ate enough for ten people,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, it pays quite well.”

Maggie used my chit on the register before telling me to wait a sec. Then she went over to a ‘pastry’ display and took some items out before putting them in a bag and bringing it to me.

“Here, there’s always some room for dessert, on the house.”

“Um, isn’t it in a bag?”

She laughed, “I’m glad things worked out for you. You just stay out of trouble y’hear?” then she handed me the bag.

Ah! She was giving them to me!

“Yes Maggie. And thank you for dessert.”

I liked dessert.

We went to the arcade again, I was growing to like this place. The reflex testers were rather useless for me, but I enjoyed the hypothetical situations some machines displayed. Being presented with dangerous scenarios in a safe environment was great for thinking up countermeasures.

It was while Mikey was having trouble with a game named “Gribblins n’ Ghouls” that it happened. He got stuck on the ‘third level’ and Tim pulled out his phone, typing into it a bit before saying, “Alright, looks like the entrance is behind the staircase, but it needs the red key.” Sure enough, Mikey was able to continue once he obtained the red

key from a ‘mini-boss’.

I had to ask, “It gave you the answer that quickly?”

“Yeah, it was the first thing when I searched it, didn’t even need to visit the website. Guess lots of people get stuck there.”

Now I was really curious. I pulled out Nicole’s phone and went to the ‘homescreen’. Sandra had shown me how to make calls and ‘text’, but I hadn’t been interested in all the other little icons. I clicked one and found it to be a ‘calculator’. The next was a list of things I didn’t understand. Finally the next one pulled up a blank page, and a section was designated for text.

I hesitantly typed in “mutavus” and clicked the confirm button.

A loading symbol displayed, and then a list of items appeared. At the top was:

Co-act-us Mu-tav-us

noun

an infectious disease that causes rapid mutation in those it infects. No known cure, vector of infection unknown.

see: *mutation prevention, mutavus hotline, reporting mutant animals, history of (mutavus)*.

...it wasn’t just a communication device.

I typed in “benedicci.”

Pseu-do-mo-nia Ben-e-dic-ci

noun

a symbiotic bacteria that boosts its host's immune system. Can cause additional beneficial effects if the host has high compatibility. Famous for being the only known preventative measure for Mutavus.

see: *mutation prevention, inoculations, medical resources in your area, history of (benedicci)*.

It was an information depository! Hurriedly I stored the phone in my "pocket" to hide what I was doing. Pretending to watch Mikey play Gribblins n' Ghouls on the outside, on the inside I shifted a bit and was typing in all the things I wanted to know about, but couldn't ask others because it would seem suspicious that I didn't already know about them. Mutavus, supers, human anatomy, fruit, it was **all here**! It gave definitions, sources, even *pronunciation instructions*! I had spent **hours** listening in on conversations and trying to decipher the links between spoken words and their spelling, and now it was just handed to me. It was unbelievable. Information on any topic I wanted, as much as I wanted, for free, and humans walked around with these devices. **In**. **Their**. **Pockets**!

I wanted one.

"Hey, Tim? I changed my mind, would you be able to show me the store you were talking about?"

"Yeah, sure. We can go when Mikey loses."

"Yeah right! I'm going for the gold!" Mikey replied.

Mikey didn't complete the game, but he managed to get really far before he "died," and we headed out to get myself a cell phone.

Tim led us to a store closer to Ashwood St. named simply, "Cedric's Hardware." Inside it was messier than I had thought it would be, with shelves of haphazardly placed parts and devices making up the majority of the store. I asked if this store was related to tinkers and Tim said no, the owner was an engineer, and the store was just a place to buy and trade parts.

The human managing the store (not the owner apparently) asked what I was looking for in a phone. I wasn't sure, and both Tim and Mikey were surprised to find I had never owned a cell phone before. The manager pulled out several different phones for me to see, and I quickly realized that I wanted a sturdy one like Nicole's. Hers had extra reinforcement of the case and screen in comparison to the others, and Tim helped me pick one out given that information.

Ninety dollars, one hundred and five including the prepaid 'timecard' (apparently access to the information database was not *entirely* free). It felt like a large amount to me, but Tim assured me it was a great deal. I had to agree.

We hung out a little longer, but eventually Tim had to head home, and Mikey headed off as well. Crazily, Mikey wasn't planning to attend the company dinner, claiming to be too "drained" from last night's job. He should try to eat more, he probably doesn't keep a big enough reserve.

I wandered around until dinner time, fiddling with my new phone, and eventually the time for the dinner to start came close. I headed for the nearest elevator, rushing a bit. All my excitement today had given me an appetite.

It was crowded when I entered the main room. Tables had been rearranged to provide maximum seating, and I was reminded of the

school cafeteria. Masks were everywhere, and not all of them were minion masks. Most of the unique masks were at a table at the back of the room, but others were spread out in the crowd. I spotted Imp and most of the other newbies, and went to sit at their table.

“Hey there Tofu, glad to see you didn’t bite the big one. You know you could have just surrendered right?” said Imp.

“So I’ve been told.”

“Ha, well maybe next time you’ll remember.”

I remembered the first time, I just hadn’t trusted it. Magenta didn’t inspire confidence with her bone-breaking punches.

I sat at the table, it was set up so that the food platters would go in the center, and you could just take from the platters instead of getting up to visit a buffet (probably to reduce traffic with such a large gathering). Currently there were 'chips' and various sauces to dip them in, and I began to sample them.

As the party continued I talked with everyone around me, a few of which were minions from other teams, and I got their stories of the job, apparently things had gone much better for them. The only other team to face trouble was team three, and Pebbles had given me their account of the vigilante back at the safehouse. Looking up “vigilante” on my phone I vowed to avoid them. Attacking villains without a support network! They must be either highly dangerous individuals or dangerously unstable, neither of which I wanted to deal with.

I found out that Ifrit knew about most of the villains in the room, and she pointed them out to both Gregor and myself. Mostly I was interested in the details I couldn’t get from my phone, such as alliances and personality traits. Unsurprisingly there was little public knowledge about most of them, my phone searches turning up only names and assumed powers in most cases. Hellion was one of the

unique masks Ifrit pointed out since Gregor and I hadn't met our boss yet. I took special note of her.

And, once again, someone put up the footage of my fight on a big screen. Luckily the main focus was actually footage of Hellion and several other villains attacking an Espada stronghold, taken from a 'news channel', but my fight was tacked on at the end. It was just as embarrassing as the first time, especially with Pebbles standing up and shouting in my direction (he may have been drunk already).

But, finally (*finally*) the food was brought out. Sandra was true to her word, and a platter of the Kobe beef made its way to my table. I took two pieces to start and a few side dishes before I started eating it as slowly as possible, savoring it.

Partway through the meal Hellion got up and delivered a 'speech', but, to be honest, I was too focused on not gobbling up the Kobe beef to hear it.

It was delicious.

There was one more thing I had to do for the day. Luckily I was able to restrain myself from eating all the beef, and I got a bag to take some with me.

The safehouse elevators turned out to be for jobs and emergencies, not for casual traveling, so I decided to just navigate my way south from Ashwood St. to find Nicole's sewer entrance. I needed to map this area anyways. With this I would be able to cross off both Tim and Nicole from the list of people I owed lunch.

Unfortunately, walking through alleyways with an unmarked bag at night was probably a poor tactical choice on my part.

“Hand over the bag and no one gets hurt,” said a human as it stepped out in front of me, brandishing a knife. I heard footsteps behind me, and when I checked two other humans had blocked off the alley behind me, with a knife and a length of pipe respectively.

Estimated threat: low;

I didn’t really want to bother with this right now, I was busy, and after eating all day I actually wasn’t hungry for once.

“Um, is there any chance we could do this later?”

It didn’t bother responding, instead just silently closing in. Oh well.

There’s always room for dessert.

Ch18 Tips For Delivery

As it turns out, sometimes there *isn't* room for dessert. Five hundred or so pounds of meat simply doesn't compress into the body of an eighteen year old human. I harvested what I could, even increasing my height by two more inches and making my fake clothes extra baggy, but in the end I had to throw two half-eaten corpses into the nearest dumpster. Such a waste.

Even worse was that all three of them were non-mutated males, which meant I wasn't getting any new genetic or anatomical information out of this. Searching the net for information on human anatomy was insightful, but images don't compare to the real thing, especially since I don't know many of the words for concepts I want to know about. For now I'm simply plugging words I do know in, and using the definitions it provides to search for more words. Having two phones for most of the afternoon helped with that.

As for the fight itself I did get some good practice in. I restricted myself to using human fighting methods and just the one arm (I wasn't going to risk putting down the food) in order to keep it challenging. Got stabbed twice in the ribs because of it, but it showed my practice with Adder was worthwhile, I didn't need to burn any extra resources to improve reflexes like I had when fighting the Espada minions on the subway. The biggest problem was actually keeping them from running when they realized they couldn't win. I'd learned my lesson from the rats, no letting them gather reinforcements.

Pocketing the knives (they didn't have wallets on them) I went back to searching for the street nearest Nicole's den. It would have been nice if I could use my mask again, but map directions had to be approved by a lieutenant, something about a security risk. The minion masks had a lot of strange restrictions, and Socket said I could get a real mask if I decided to "don the cowl."

Absolutely not. My life was dangerous enough as is, and I was quite satisfied with my rewards as a minion.

I wandered a few more blocks checking street signs, but I didn't recognize any of them. Then I tried asking for help from what few humans passed by on the street. The responses were… disappointing, if they responded at all. The two humans who didn't just ignore me or yell at me didn't know the address I was searching for. Seems I'd just have to look for it myself.

The design of Fortress City actually worked against me in this regard. Since everything was arranged into equal blocks of similar buildings everything tended to look the same, the only real identifiers being where buildings had been modified or damaged, or where a non-housing structure was placed. I knew the general direction of where I needed to go though, and I headed south-west while keeping a lookout for any landmarks I recognized from my brief time south of Ashwood.

I strolled along, clicking words into the phones, and observing the few humans that were still out and about. Ever since Odd Summer was announced the streets cleared quickly after sunset, but there was still some activity until it hit the later hours. Some of which were the security soldier caste, or "cops" as the humans called them.

Ahead of me, on the other side of the street, two such cops were speaking with a mutant with horns outside of an apartment building. The mutant's face was bloody, and every now and then it gestured up at the apartment while it talked to them. It was getting harder and harder to avoid cops lately, these incidents were becoming more and more commonplace. Tonight especially seemed somewhat bad, this was the third such patrol I had noted. It was a concern for me since there was a curfew in effect. Normally the curfew was ignored, but with this many cops around it was possible one might stop me.

After spotting the fifth patrol (this one currently unoccupied with a prior activity) I ducked into an alley.This was taking longer than I thought it would with all the obstacles, I needed a better method of travel. Streets were no good with the cops everywhere, and alleys were no good with the risk of ambushes. I considered the manhole cover farther down the alley but discarded the idea, if I couldn't find my way aboveground I definitely wouldn't find my way below in the

tunnels. I needed to go higher, not lower.

The buildings on either side of me had metal staircases attached to their sides. I checked to make sure no one was around and then stretched an arm out to grab the bottom rung of a ladder, pulling myself up. From there I climbed up the metal stairs all the way to the roof. I spied the silhouettes of the larger buildings around Ashwood St. and was able to compare them with my internal map, so at least I knew I was heading in the right general direction. As for a route…

I measured the distance between the building I was on and the one next to it. It was only about sixteen feet, not a difficult distance to jump. I checked for humans again just in case, but I didn't think this would stand out too much even if I was seen.

Now for the first test. I took a running start and jumped to the next roof. It wasn't very difficult, but the extra density I currently carried meant I stumbled upon landing, and only cleared the gap with three feet to spare. I made some minor modifications and jumped the next gap, and the next, making minor modifications after each jump. Using the cement bridges that spanned major streets I made it seventeen blocks before I had to go back to the ground floor to cross to the next building.

This was working out much better, I could avoid the more problematic humans and practice designs at the same time. Now all I had to do was figure out how to fold the reversed knee and extra leg length into my normal disguise, maybe if the tibia sockets with the femur-

crack

I stepped in something.

My foot had landed on a round organic object that had been nestled in a bed of shredded paper, crushing its shell. I hadn't seen it before I

jumped because of the waist high barrier around this roof, causing me to land on it unknowingly. On the inside it was filled with nutrients, and a small, half-formed organism floated within. Some kind of incubation vessel?

I tested the composition and felt relief, it was just an egg, similar to those served at breakfast, and not a human egg. The definitions from my phone said humans have live young, but with so many mutant variations I wasn't going to discount the possibility that some laid eggs. I was still getting used to the idea that *all* women doubled as progenitors. It seemed like an inferior system when compared to having a dedicated progenitor at first, but when I calculated the numbers I realized that they could effectively double their population count within three to four years or so at maximum production, and the death of a single progenitor wouldn't put a scratch in those numbers. Obviously some kind of countermeasure towards all the dangerous predators around. Speaking of which…

I scanned the rooftop. There was an access door to the next level down, and a few ventilation pipes sticking out of the ceiling, but I saw no signs of life. Whatever had made the eggs wasn't here right now, so I absorbed the rest of the broken egg and crossed the roof to leap to the next building.

I almost made it.

CAWwwwWWWwwwWWWwww

Error: balance decalibrated.

Recalibrating...

I stumbled and fell to my side right before I could jump, my limbs and balance both malfunctioning. That sound! The warbling cry had

thrown my balance completely off. I scanned the vicinity and found what had to be the source. A large unknown organism was perched next to the nest I stepped on. It stood on two thin legs with taloned feet, its head had a strange claw-like mouth with two yellow eyes, and its body was covered in dark...scales? Or maybe fur? They seemed flimsy. At its feet was a dead human, a fresh kill from the looks of it, but currently the kill was ignored in favor of glaring at me. I tried to stand back up but-

CAWwwwWWWwwwWWWwww

Another warbling cry pierced the air, and again my balance failed me. I tried to avoid falling on my bag of food containers this time.

Estimated threat: High.

The cry ended and this time the dark-shrieker spread two limbs covered in scale/fur to its sides and flapped them, rising into the air! It dove for me, and I was forced to try and lamely fend it off from my prone position at the edge of the roof. Its talons were sharp, but the organism itself was quite light, which allowed me to bat it away temporarily.

I needed to get off the roof and down to the ground level, if this creature could fly then the flat roof of a building was a bad place to fight it. Peering over the side I saw there was a metal bar staircase, and I hefted myself over the small barrier to jump down.

CAWwwwWWWwwwWWWwww

I fell down, my malfunctioning limbs barely able to cradle the bag of food as I went tumbling, past the staircase and five floors down to the bottom of the alley. My modified legs might have been able to take a fall like this, but my malfunctioning joints couldn't position properly, and I hit the ground with a **crunch** breaking one leg and parts of my spine.

This was one annoying organism. Physically it was inferior, but that cry turned my limbs into limp appendages every time.

"It came from over here! Quickly, someone's on the ground!"

I turned my head to the alley entrance, where two humans in security uniforms were running over to me.

Great, cops…

Wait, cops! Great! I could use them as a distraction!

"Sir! Sir are you alright?!" said one of the cops. Both had their guns drawn, and they were scanning both myself and the surrounding alley for danger.

"There was a large, flying, monster," I said, being careful to wheeze my answer as if critically injured.

"Don't try to move… don't worry, we'll get you help soon," said one cop, covering the alley while the other started speaking rapidly into a handheld communication device.

I was already healing, bone fractures weren't a difficult fix, what I needed now was to finish recalibrating my balance to rely on vision

instead of motion. Around me the world went silent as I destroyed my own sound sensory organs, hopefully if I couldn't hear it the sonic attack wouldn't affect me as much.

The two cops spotted the dark-shrieker first and started to fire upon it, but I could tell the moment when it used its sonic attack again. Both cops fell over in a limp heap, and while it didn't throw my balance off as much, I could still feel the vibration of its cry in my *bones*, weakening my limbs. I would need to maintain a good distance.

Shakily I rose to my feet, the dark-shrieker passing overhead as it tried to attack the cops that shot at it. I lunged for the downed cops' position myself and managed to land a good punch on the dark-shrieker before it could slash into the first cop with its talons, sending it off-course. It almost slammed into a dumpster, but managed to correct its course and gain altitude for another pass.

I dived for the guns the cops had dropped, both of them were still twitching on the floor and couldn't use them anyway. The designs were a bit different for these guns, they appeared to be more advanced versions of the one I had disassembled, but the basics were the same. Grabbing one, I lined it up with the dark-shrieker and clicked the trigger.

Nothing.

I grabbed the second gun and tried again. Nothing. A small panel had lit up when I tried to fire the guns and I checked the displayed symbols.

Unauthorized User

Irritating.

The dark-shrieker passed overhead, and my limbs weakened as it strafed me with its sonic attack. When it circled and dived at me again I chucked the guns at it. Both hit its face, and in its surprise it forgot to scream as it passed overhead and out of the alley into the street. I needed something heavier I could throw.

I lurched to the dumpster nearby and opened the lid, grabbing the first large piece of garbage I saw. Out in the street the dark-shrieker circled and came in for another pass. I took aim as it got closer and-

A purple blur rammed into the side of the dark-shrieker, slamming it so hard some of its dark black scale/fur dislodged as they went out of sight around the corner of the building.

Magenta!

Time for me to leave.

I dropped the garbage and ran to the back of the alley, turned a corner, and then ran until I found a manhole. Pulling it up in a hurry I dived into the tunnel and slammed the cover closed behind me. Pausing to make sure I wasn't followed, I regenerated the damage from the fight, and slowed down to do some important calculations.

…

Did I owe Magenta lunch?

…

No.

I followed the sewers for a while before going back up to the surface, I didn't want to risk getting lost or running into any more rats. True there was the risk of Magenta and cops, but changing my coverings and face should keep them from recognizing me as the person the dark-shrieker was targeting. The surface had its risks, but so far the ground floor and especially the alleys had proven to be the least dangerous of my options. I should have stuck with them from the beginning.

I alternated between the sidewalks and alleys as necessary, trying not to attract notice, and just observing the night time activities of humans. Through one apartment window I saw a group of males around a screen that showed some sort of training exercise. Over at a street corner was a "Tex's Taco Stand," a mobile dispensary where humans were occasionally stopping and getting food (I bought one, tacos are tasty). One large building had a line of interestingly dressed humans waiting to get inside, where loud noises were creating a rhythmic pattern. All of these different places and people I had never seen before told me one thing:

I was kinda lost.

The taco vendor had told me I was going in the right general direction, but I still hadn't seen any street signs I recognized. I decided to climb to the roof of a building (carefully) and check the

skyline of Ashwood St. again.

Yep, I was going in the right general direction. Maybe… thirty to forty more blocks before I crossed the route I took to the safehouse? That wasn't so bad, as long as this really was the right direction and I wasn't more turned around than I thought I was.

I climbed down the metal staircase slowly, being careful to not spill the contents of my bag. After all the night's activities it had started to develop a few holes and seemed a bit fragile. I started to gather mass to make a temporary pouch while I climbed down.

As I dropped from the bottom rung of the last ladder a small metal canister flew out from behind a dumpster. It landed right in front of me and exploded, creating a flash of light and noise so loud they damaged my sensory organs.

I fell into a crouch, and tried to run towards where I remembered some cover being.

But a spray of shrapnel pellets caught me in the head.

> Error: Human.exe has crashed, hardware destroyed.
>
> Estimated threat: Extreme.
>
> EmergencyProtocol: PD;

The creature collapsed, the bag it carried dropping to the floor of the alley as it flopped forwards onto the ground. It twitched a bit as blood spurted from the crater of its face, propelled by the last few beats of its hearts.

A man rose up from behind the dumpster, dressed in dark clothing, with a red bandana hiding the lower half of his face. But his eyes glowed as they centered in on the creature he had been tracking all night. It wasn't wearing armbands, but even if it had the half-eaten bodies he came across in a dumpster sealed its fate. Monster or cannibal, a maneater couldn't be suffered to live. Not in his sector. Not by him.

He raised his pump-action shotgun and emptied the rest of his ammo into its torso. Never a good idea to hold back on Odd Summer horrors.

He maintained a distance from the corpse, reloading his shotgun. Its torso looked like hamburger meat now, but sometimes these monsters regenerated on you. He waited ten minutes for the blood to stop flowing and confirm it wasn't regenerating.

Finally satisfied, he relaxed his posture and turned to head back to his bike. He needed to call this in so the C's wouldn't waste time investigating a monster corpse.

The moment he turned fully, tendons and muscles that had been regenerating and tensing under a dense layer of protective flesh snapped into motion, propelling the "corpse" of the monster forward. While its outer layers were pulverised, its innermost skeletal and muscle systems had been largely protected by its stockpiled mass. Its arms snapped forward, embedding two knives deep into the shoulders of the human.

He screamed and tried to turn his shotgun, but his arms no longer listened to him. The monster tore the shotgun from his hands and flung it into the same dumpster the human had hidden behind, then it turned him around and slammed him into the wall of the building next to them. He tried to kick at it, but it just took a third knife and stabbed it into his leg above the knee, eliciting another scream.

The monsters broken head scanned the alley, then it turned the crater of its face towards the human and he wished it hadn't, inside the

crater was a tiny cluster of eyes that stared back at him. Seconds passed.

“Well? The fuck you waitin’ for freak?!” the human asked.

“Orgethesrs?”

“What?”

The sound had come from the creature, but its vocal apparatuses were still too damaged to form real sounds. It waited a few moments for the micro units to work, then tried again.

“Others?”

“Their’s a fuckin’ million of us, you’re screwed.”

The creature made another scan of the alley and after a minute determined this was most likely a ‘lie’. It wasn’t used to dealing with humans without the filter of Human.exe, but the hardware for it would take a while to fix. At least the helmet/mask had protected its core perfectly.

“Why attack?” it asked the human.

“Why? WHY!? You killed three people you psycho zombie!”

The creature took another minute to analyze the statement while the human gasped for breath. Yes, the death of other humans seemed to concern humans. This matched its knowledge base.

“How track?”

“Fuck you!”

It scanned the alley again while it tried to decipher the confusing response. Until its gaze landed on the spilled bag of food. Its head turned back to the human slowly, with regained purpose.

“You spilled my food.”

“Oh, so you can actually make a complete sentence! Well, why don’t you take those two brain cells, and shove them right up your a-**fffl ghr**,” his words were cut off by the creature’s hand covering his mouth. It leaned in to make sure the troublesome human understood its next words fully.

“Pay me back.”

I was in a really bad mood.

All night I had been attacked over and over.

I almost ran into Magenta again.

Apparently the vigilante had tracked me using a power, because eating his eyes hadn’t revealed any usable structures or genetic code.

Attacking people with just a tracking power, and it called *me* a 'psycho'!

I accidently broke the shotgun when I hurled it into the dumpster.

I was *still* lost.

And, worst of all, one of the shotgun pellets had punctured the container that held the sauce for the beef! It had leaked into a sewer grate before I realized what had happened! If it had at least spilled on the ground I could have tried to filter it!

I trudged down the sidewalk.

It was getting *really* late. I hadn't seen other walking humans in a while now, and I was desperate enough to ask a cop for directions at this point, if I could find one. Finally one of the buildings I passed was open, a "Darkside Bar n' Grill." Outside the building were many two-wheeled transport devices, and from inside I could hear lots of laughter and more rhythmic sound patterns. I approached it and entered.

Inside the bar were lots of humans and combat model mutants. They were drinking, playing cards, and in one corner two males were having a contest of strength with their right arms while others cheered them on. They wore lots of interesting clothes too, but I noticed a theme of 'leather jackets', 'jeans', 'bandanas', lots of 'tattoos' (having a way to look up words is great), and most of their jackets had the name "Darksiders" printed on them somewhere. Maybe these were minions of a different super villain? Surely they could help me.

"Um, excuse me. Excuse me! I'm really lost, would any of you be able to give me directions to Manchineel St?"

The bar quieted quickly as the humans turned to me. The closest one replied.

“Yeah, you’re definitely in the wrong neighborhood buddy.”

The two ‘motorcycles’ came to a stop next to the sidewalk, and I hopped off the back of the one I was riding. Then I clicked the strap of my borrowed helmet and handed it back to the ‘biker’ who had driven me to the street I needed.

“Thank you for transporting me Teddy.”

“No problem amigo. Can’t believe you were thinking of walking, streets are crazy right now.”

“Yes, that was probably a bad idea on my part.”

The two bikers said their goodbyes and left, and I headed for the manhole cover that would lead to Nicole’s den. I would definitely have to visit that bar again.

I descended into the sewer and headed to the lighted section that marked Nicole’s den, making sure to change my face to the way it normally looked on the way. Looking ahead down the tunnel I didn’t

see Nicole, but I heard some familiar clacking noises coming from the tunnel I had originally used to reach her intersection. Sure enough, Nicole's claw appeared from around the corner, slowly followed by the rest of her front half. She appeared to be carrying something, and I was glad to see that her missing claw was regenerating slowly.

"Hello Nicole!" I yelled down the tunnel.

She halted in surprise before she could completely exit the passage, then yelled out, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Tofu!" I replied.

"Tofu?! You're back?! And you look fine?!" she paused for a second, "T-turn around!"

"What?"

"Turn around!"

"Why?'

"Cause I said so! And don't peek."

I didn't understand, but I did what she asked.

From behind me I heard scuttling and scraping as she hurriedly returned to her den tunnel. Now it made sense, she was an ambush predator designed for narrow tunnels, and I had caught her outside her den. She probably felt vulnerable.

"Alright, you can turn around," she said.

I turned and approached her.

"Hi Nicole, you're looking much better."

“Look who’s talking, did an actual super help you?” she asked.

“I got some help, but not for the injuries, I regenerated those. I’m a shapeshifter.”

“...Oh… so why didn’t you say that last time?”

“I was confused from blood loss, but here, I brought back your phone and armbands. Thank you for loaning them to me, they were quite helpful,” I replied as I handed her items back to her, “I also brought some food as thanks for saving me from the rats, here,” and I handed her the bag of food (the bikers had given me a new bag since mine was falling apart, such nice people).

She held the items and stared at the bag of food strangely before saying, “Um, thank you. Let me just put these away real quick,” and withdrew into her den, emerging soon after empty handed.

“Did you already eat it?” That was really fast.

“Oh, no, I stored it away for later. I’ve already eaten dinner. Thank you though, I’m sure it’s delicious,” she replied.

Oh right, she had the rat corpses to eat, and I took so long getting here.

“Yeah, sorry I’m intruding so late. I had a really hard time finding this place again.”

“Oh, did my phone run out of batteries?” she asked.

“No,” what did batteries have to do with it? “It was just difficult to locate.”

“Like, you couldn’t remember the address?”

“I remembered it.”

…

“So, why didn’t you look up a map?” she asked.

“I did, or tried to. But all it did was give me the definition of what a map was when I typed it in.”

There was a very long pause before she spoke again.

“Tofu, I mean GPS. Was it completely down or something? Why not use that?”

…

…

...GPS?

A note from Gogglesbear

And some pixel art I've dubbed Magenta's Secret Hamburger Recipe by the_random_user

(I've avoided using descriptions of Tofu's image since it's a shapeshifter, so if you want to keep your own mental image of Tofu, don't look!)

Spoiler: Spoiler

Ch19 Fly In My Soup

"...and then when you're done you can turn off the GPS here. Although most people just type in the address of the place they want into the web browser, and then e-maps will show them a route."

"I see."

"Are you sure you'll remember all this next time?"

"I'll remember."

"Yeeeah... let me just walk you through it again real quick."

Nicole had been just as surprised that I'd never had a phone as Tim and Mikey, and was giving me an in-depth tour of the phone controls and features. I was glad for it, as certain things about the 'user interface' were very unintuitive to me. Why was the camera shortcut accessed by swiping left on the lock screen and the call shortcut right? Why did some features require downloading an app when others didn't? Why was the map system accessed by clicking an icon of a green/blue sphere instead of just being labeled "Maps?" It probably made sense to a tinker, but to me it was just gibberish that had to be remembered.

"...and that's how you put new contacts into the address book. You can even edit the ringtone for each person individually."

And some of these phone features were somewhat useless to me, I could just remember phone numbers and addresses. The music library, the calculator, and the calendar also seemed equally useless.

I might try out the games app though.

“Is that Gribblin’s n’ Ghouls?” I asked.

“No, that’s Gribblin Tamer, it’s a mobile spin-off. You’ve never heard of it before?”

“I have not.”

“Here, let me show you real quick.”

More than the phone features, I was impressed with how adept Nicole was with manipulating a tiny screen with her mandibles. Both the smaller claws at the end of each mandible and the mandibles themselves actually had more joints than was initially apparent, allowing the mandibles to bend like human arms and the smaller claws to “break” into crude, three-fingered hands. They were obviously meant more for combat than fine manipulation, but seeing her tap away at the phone reminded me a lot of how Viper managed a touchscreen with her own sharp claws. Obviously humans valued phones quite highly if they devoted so much practice to using them (humans really put in extra effort when it comes to rectangles).

“...and that’s why its my favorite game,” **cough**, “So anyways! Did you have any more questions about your phone?”

“I don’t think so, if I have more can I call you later?”

“Oh, um, sure I guess? Or just a text. Anyways it’s really late, and I talked really long, you probably need to get going. I can call a taxi if you need one? Or you can call someone and...”

In fact I had more questions, but they were of the biological nature rather than technological. Between Nicole’s excellent combat design,

corrosive spit, and eight eyes (multiple eyes are surprisingly harder to run in parallel than I thought), I was starting to feel rather envious. Plus I knew she still had more secrets, judging by the fact her voice didn't come from her mandibled mouth and instead echoed out of her den. I somehow doubted she'd be willing to answer these questions though (and I didn't want to be 'rude' and risk her cutting off contact), so instead I decided to change the subject to keep the conversation going. Maybe if I spent enough time around her I'd find a way to politely ask for an acid sample.

"By the way. What's that thing you were carrying?" I interrupted while pointing to the large object wrapped in brown material she had been carrying.

"Oh that? I found it in the sewer, somebody dumped it. It's pretty grisly, but I suppose you've seen worse," and she reached over with her large claw and pulled the material away.

Inside was a corpse, but it was… strange. It looked like a fusion of a large rat and one of the silver-scales, but rather than the well-designed organic modifications mutavus made, this was a crude amalgamation of distinct parts from both organisms. In some places I could see pieces of metal, and even… string? Yes, string stitched between the opposing parts. I guess it was artificially created by someone, but like the phone UI's the logic for it stumped me.

"Poor thing died a little after I found it," Nicole said, "Probably some Odd Summer jagoff dumping their failed experiment. I hate when people mess with the Nessies."

"Nessies?"

"It's what I call the long-necked animals. They keep the sewer clean, so I like having them around, but the stupid rats and other idiots pick on them. They might look scary, but they're harmless, if they get bitey you just bonk them on the head and they'll leave you alone."

“Ah. What do you think they were trying to accomplish with this one?”

“Who knows, people are always dumping stuff down here. Maybe they were testing their new power, or trying to make a bio-weapon? Either way I’m reporting it. I don’t want some wannabe Dr. Frankenstein dumping bodies down here.”

Oh! This was supposed to be a bio-weapon? Interesting. It was… well…

Inferior design.

If this was meant for combat it was functionally useless. It looked like they may have been trying to combine the better features of both organisms, like the rats’ teeth and the silver-scales’ neck and fins, but the result was completely unbalanced. I’d be surprised if it could walk, let alone fight.

But it had still been a bio-weapon, and Nicole seemed to care about its death. Interesting.

“What do you plan to do with it?” I asked.

“I’ll take the body somewhere else and call Central in the morning. They’ll send someone to take my report and get the body,” she paused for a second, “Bleh, I hate having to call them myself.”

“Why?”

“Well…” I heard a sigh come from her den, “They’re always a hassle to deal with. I’m technically squatting, and if they find out I’m living down here they’ll threaten to evict me. As if I have anywhere else to go… and if I’m *really* unlucky enough it’ll be a rookie they send,

who'll panic and take some shots at me before screaming and running and calling in a cape, and then I'll get lectured by a hero for not wearing my armbands while a bunch of cops stare at me, *again*, even though I ***was*** wearing armbands and it was ***his*** fault for losing his cool and not checking properly, and it'll be *super embarrassing!*…" she paused to take a breath, seeming somewhat agitated. Then she continued, "Sorry, I'm rambling. I don't often have someone to talk to about this."

"That's fine. I can empathize."

"Ha, sure you can."

"Yes?"

"No offense Tofu, but how could a *shapeshifter* empathize with *me*."

I noticed the change in her voice. Irritation? I may have said something rude.

"Well, I've been mistaken for a monster before as well," I explained.

For a second her eyes seemed… angry? It was hard to tell since her face didn't have much in the way of expressions. But then she muttered, "…Touché I guess."

Maybe she misunderstood? I clarified, "Yeah, the guy shot me in the face with a shotgun."

She blinked, "WHAT!? I, I thought you meant yesterday when I… Was this how you got knocked into the sewer?"

"No, this was a separate incident."

"Jesus, how do you get into so much trouble? Did you report him?"

"No reason to."

“Tofu! You can’t just let people get away with stuff like that! Even if you can regenerate that is NOT an excuse!”

“Well, I, I don’t really like calling Central either. I’ve had a bad experience with a hero as well.”

She went silent for a a few seconds, then said, “Tofu, be honest with me. Are you a cowl?”

“No.”

“Honest? You’re not a villain?”

“I’m not.”

“A vigilante?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Or a hero in training?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“No. I’m really not.”

“Okay… heh, dang, would have been kinda cool if you were a sidekick or something.”

“I’m not interested in being a hero. It seems too dangerous.”

She started laughing, “Oh my god Tofu. If you can survive a shotgun to the face, or being ***ripped in half***, I don’t think being a hero would be any more dangerous. At the very least, you could totally be a sidekick.”

“If you say so,” I replied doubtfully. She just laughed harder.

“Anyways,” she said after she composed herself, “I um, guess being a shapeshifter comes with its own problems… sorry. I thought you were pitying me, or making fun of me or something.”

“I wasn’t.”

“I know, I should have figured. People who would don’t walk around all night going out of their way to return cell phones. Thanks again by the way, the charger for my laptop is still busted and I don’t know how I would have contacted my usual courier.”

“Courier?”

“Yeah, I use him to deliver stuff I order, or sell the gizmos I salvage, he usually gets me a decent return. He’s a bit iffy, but he’s honest enough where it counts, which is all I care about.”

Huh.

“Anyways, it really is getting late,” Nicole said, “Do you actually have a way home?”

“I was going to walk.”

“Tofu, it’s like,” she checked her phone, “Three in the morning! Jeez, I talked so long, I’m a bit of a night owl so I didn’t notice. Let me call you a taxi.”

Bleh, taxis cost quite a bit more than a bus or subway ticket. Waste of food money.

“Um… actually,” I eyed the dead bio-weapon, “What if I call Central? I could report the corpse and ask the cop who shows up for a ride.”

“Er, I don’t know if that will work Tofu.”

“They won’t be able to just leave me there after curfew, and if I say I found it above they won’t bother you here.”

She considered it, then said, “Alright, I guess you can still call a taxi if it doesn’t work out. Can you carry it up the ladder?”

“Yes, no problem.”

I considered the rat-nessie while I rewrapped it in the brown material. It wasn’t nearly as dangerous as what I had come to expect from a bio-weapon. Indeed, of all the things I had fought so far, the hardest fights had always been the supers, not bio-weapons or mutated organisms. The dozens of other test subjects back at the test chamber couldn’t compare to the majority of supers I had encountered.

I had expected most bio-weapons to be like the yellow-fur, and to be treated in a similar fashion, but Nicole had seemed almost sad at the demise of this specimen. Maybe it wasn’t as big a deal as I thought it was?

I finished wrapping the rat-nessie and hoisted the large corpse over a shoulder before facing Nicole.

“Well then,” said Nicole, “I guess this is goodbye.”

“For now.”

“Ha. Until you have more questions with obvious answers I guess? Anything you’d like answered before you go?”

No one had figured out my true nature so far, but a few had come quite close. It was possible someone might in the future, it would do to be prepared for their reaction. Nicole was faction-less, reasonable, unlikely to ‘blab’, and seemed sympathetic to the dead bio-weapon. It

was risky to discard my disguise, but if I were to reveal to anyone that I was a bio-weapon, Nicole was the best choice.

I think I'll tell her.

> Human.exe emergency shut-down;
>
> Human.exe displaying behavior harmful to core: analyzing...
>
> Rolling back thought process kernel...
>
> Rewriting...
>
> Restarting Human.exe;

"No, that's everything Nicole. Thank you for helping me with the phone."

"No problem."

"Later."

"Later."

I walked down the left tunnel and around the bend, heading back the way I came. When I reached the ladder I climbed up slowly, hauling up the rat-nessie corpse with me, but when I reached the top of the tunnel I stopped, and shifted until I had myself and the corpse properly braced. Rather than call the cops and get a ride, I planned to just wait until morning when things were safer and walk home. For now, I had a lot of thinking to do.

And besides, surely a bio-weapon corpse would reveal something useful?

My conversation with Nicole had been informative. Partly because of the things she taught me about the phone, but more so because something she had said gave me an inkling that something was wrong.

“People who would don’t walk around all night going out of their way to return cell phones,” she had said, and indeed, I had gone *well* out of my way to visit Nicole. More so than might be reasonable. In fact, several decisions I had made over the past few days had been questionable. Nothing absolutely wrong, but something was… odd.

I had tried to act as bait for Magenta to obtain the Kobe beef. But heroes aren’t supposed to kill, so it should have been safe. Logical.

I cut myself in half to escape Magenta, losing a lot of resources, rather than get arrested. But Magenta had proven more violent than previously thought only after I was already engaged in combat. Logical.

I didn’t destroy all the evidence of the ambushers since it would have wasted time. But how could I have predicted a vigilante would track me? He had even said I killed three people, but there were only two bodies, and I was careful about leaving a scent trail. His power had obviously informed him somehow. Logical.

I had chosen to fight the dark-shrieker rather than simply escape. But its sonic attack was the only real threat and it wasn't a lethal one.

While it could damage me with its talons it couldn’t have really killed me with its meager physical abilities, and if it was a mutant I might have been able to obtain that weapon myself. Logical.

I had returned Nicole’s phone rather than keep it for myself because… I had my own? But I only bought it because I knew I would return Nicole’s… and I was going to return it anyway because... I wanted to?

Illogical.

Damn. Something really was wrong. It hadn't been apparent at the time, otherwise I would have caught it, but something was throwing my decisions just a tiny bit off, and I couldn't risk the problem growing. I would need to do a full check.

Human.exe shut-down;

Initiating self-diagnostic…

Main thought process kernel: no current errors, two rewrites logged.

Sub kernels: no errors.

NOMem: no errors.

OMem: no errors.

Core: missing Command Receiver, Command Code Bank. Ignored.

Micro Unit Controls 1-118: no errors.

Scanning files…

Accessing Human.exe file structure...

Error: Access denied.

…

Accessing Human.exe file structure...

Error: Access denied.

…

Accessing Human.exe file structure...

ACCESS DENIED

...

Restarting Human.exe;

...That shouldn't have happened. Without the white-coat commands to hinder me it should be *impossible* to not have access to my own files. This proved something was wrong with Human.exe which was… really, really bad. Human.exe was vital to me now, I could barely problem solve without it. My pathetic attempt at interrogating the vigilante without it proved I needed it to work properly. Without it I was, I was a...

Drooling Infant

I had thought that Human.exe was a weapon, but it wasn't just that. It was a tool. It was a translator. It was an eye. One that gave me the insight I needed to survive in the world of humans.

And eyes have blind spots.

Nicole watched Tofu head down the tunnel and around the corner, breathing a small sigh of relief as he finally went out of sight. Having a (relatively) normal conversation had been nice, great even, but she simply wasn't used to talking to people "in the flesh" anymore, and near the end she had had to restrain herself from anxiously clicking her pincer out of habit. Besides their initial meeting, even her encounters with her courier rarely consisted of more than dropping off money and packages at a preset location.

She settled herself into her den entrance, blocking it off as best she could with her right pincer missing. Then with her real body she began cleaning up the utensils she had used to eat the food Tofu had brought her.

It had been so good! The bag had contained containers of some kind of steak, but there had also been side dishes of vegetables, like asparagus and potatoes. It had been a long time since she had eaten something that wasn't raw and bloody, or came out of a plastic package. She felt a little bad that she told Tofu she'd eat it later, but her forward mouth didn't have any taste buds, and her real body… well, she could use a shower, and a new shirt that wasn't permanently stained by oil and grease...

...and a little more courage. Maybe she should try to save for a new shirt at least…

She shook her head and slapped her face, she needed to save for a new charger cable, not frivolous items. As if she could keep a shirt clean down here. Tofu probably wouldn't even come back, despite his claims. She'd heard it all before, from old friends, distant relatives, cops, and even a hero or two. The few who kept any contact at all always said they'd "check in" on her, but somehow never found the time. Hell, her courier checked in on her more reliably than anyone else, flake that he was.

She reflexively moved to her laptop before remembering it was out of power. Then out of habit she looked around her "room" just in case the part she needed had decided to magically appear among the broken gizmos and rusty tools. No such luck, and Jasper hadn't dropped the new one she ordered at their drop point yet either. Thank god Tofu had caught her on the way back from checking it, at least for now she had her phone.

She finished putting stuff away and transferred her phone to her hands, then clicked the web browser which opened to… a web search for circuits? She clicked the back button, which revealed one for electricity. The heck?

She clicked the history and was greeted with a massive page of recent activity. She scanned the long list of searches: mutavus and benedicci (because of course he was going to), various superhero and supervillain names, lots of random words (desk, car, skyscraper, why search these?), a search for "unclothed human female" (***ugh, boys!***), a search for "human anatomy" (okay...), various searches for human organs and biology (oh, well he's a shapeshifter, maybe he needs references?), and…

...over a hundred and fifty searches for various kinds of fruit?

Her arachnid eyes swiveled in the direction Tofu had gone.

“What a weirdo.”

Ch20 Snack Run

I experimented with Human.exe for the rest of the night, the rat/ Nessie providing the resources for the experiments. My results were… mixed. On the one hand, Human.exe acted just like any other program I stored in memory. I could move it from inorganic memory to organic memory and back again, I could run an instance of it on appropriate hardware, and most surprisingly of all, I could create multiple backup copies of the program and delete them. The only thing I couldn't do was actually open up the code to look at its "guts" which was quite frustrating.

One interesting fact I did learn was that I can actually make two brains and run two separate instances of Human.exe at the same time… for about sixty seconds. Then the thought process kernels diverge too far, and the micro units in the brains get confused about who they actually belong to and self-destruct rather spectacularly, which was an interesting (if useless) result. The first time I tried it the micro units broke down so quickly that the two brains actually combusted due to the chemical energy released. I only tried the experiment a few more times after that, brains are resource intensive.

The Human.exe problem was proving to be unsolvable for now. Simply not using Human.exe was not an option, so the next step was mitigation. If I couldn't solve the problem I could mitigate its effects, and for that I need more resources: fuel, materials, knowledge, weapons, allies.

Fuel was not a problem, human food was loaded with sugar, oils, and fats for energy, easily the best fuel source available.

Nutrients and complex organic compounds were also not a problem. While human food didn't provide everything, what it didn't have I could make myself using micro units. Technically hunting for fresh meat was the best source of nutrients, but it definitely wasn't safer. The rats were becoming more aggressive (Odd Summer's influence?), and hunting humans was not an option. So far I had killed *only* five humans, all of them attacking me first, and yet the vigilante had still taken offense. What would happen if I started *actively* hunting humans I could only imagine.

My own ignorance *was* a problem. Most of my more dangerous fights were due to stumbling upon something dangerous I hadn't known to watch out for. Hopefully having a phone to research with would help with that.

I needed more weapons, something I was hoping the bioweapon corpse would help me with, but which so far had proven to be a disappointment. There were a few interesting inorganic compounds (preservatives?), and I found some muscle tissue design that was more efficient than what I had been using so far...

> Estimated .093% increased efficiency.

...but it wasn't really much to speak of. I was trying to reserve judgement of this supposed bioweapon as it did have the markings of a trial run, too many redundant organs and lots of errors in the circulatory system, but so far I hadn't learned anything I couldn't have learned by just eating a Nessie. Maybe it was just a test of the mobile platform?

Bleh.

Beep

My mask beeped. I checked it and was immediately cheered up. While the bioweapon was a disappointment, Hellion's Henchmen were constantly rewarding to work with. The displayed message was from Socket, telling me my suit was ready for testing and that I should get down to the garage "pronto." I quickly went about dissolving the remnants of the rat/Nessie and getting my disguise back in order, then I climbed to the entrance.

I lifted the manhole cover carefully, it was still early morning but the sewer entrance was on the sidewalk, so I needed to make sure the area was relatively clear. Once I climbed out, and the manhole was back in place, I headed north following my phone's map.

The sun was just cresting over the tops of the buildings. I had learned last night the full details of the sun and 'space'. The sheer distances and scale involved… terrifying. But apparently it couldn't hurt me, so I ignored it.

Despite the early hour the human traffic was already increasing rapidly, so I stuck to the sidewalks this time around. It seems there was indeed some logic to the nighttime curfew. Unlike last night I only saw one unusual occurrence; two police cars chasing a third civilian car down the road, this one on fire. The humans around me stopped to watch, but otherwise ignored it, so I paid it no further attention.

I did find a Puzzle's Pretzel vendor though, so I was finally able to buy myself one. Seems they stuff them with a melted cheese substitute, which was quite tasty.

Once I got to Ashwood St. I headed towards the gym that Mikey used since it was closer than the jacket store base entrance, and placed my mask on to enter the elevator. This phone made finding a good route *so* much easier. Oddly though, once I was actually inside the elevator the GPS began acting weirdly. It showed me continuing to move north when I knew I should be traveling down Ashwood St. I'd ask Socket about it later.

The elevator dropped me off in the usual hallway and I made my way down to the garage, greeting some of the other minions who were already up. Interestingly I noticed that several minions had fallen asleep in the main room used for the dinner party yesterday, one among them being Pebbles. It was a clever idea to sleep in the base, it was definitely safer than most places, however I preferred my tunnel by Maggie's diner. I liked the fact that I could seal both the top and bottom with the tinker made hatches, and that it opened into an empty alley. The tunnel leading to Nicole's den had definitely felt more vulnerable to rest in.

I reached the garage and found Socket in his normal area. He was slumped over one of his worktables, and seemed rather tired.

"Good morning Socket."

Socket raised his head from the table. "Tofu. Bout time lad! What were ye doing? Sniffin daisies?"

"I was-"

"Yes yes, here, try on the damn suit before I have a stroke," and he threw a suit to me that seemed much like the ones I had tried yesterday. It was a dull black and gray, with a distinct spiraling pattern wrapping around the limbs.

I used one of the curtained off areas to try on the suit. It fit rather well over my normal disguise once I dissolved my fake clothing, but it seemed very similar to the suits I had tried before, one single piece that extended to my wrists and ankles, with only a strange toothless zipper to make entry easier. The full covering was a problem despite its stretchiness.

“Well come on lad. Test er out,” said Socket as I exited the curtain.

I was confused, but I did what he said and stretched out one of my arms. The suit was indeed flexible, but when my arm expanded too far the sleeve ripped down its length! No, wait, it split on purpose? Where once it was a tube like any other sleeve it had split along the pattern and now spiraled down my arm until it wrapped around my wrist . Then when I retracted my arm the suit went with it, and the split closed up leaving only an intact sleeve and spiral pattern behind. This was perfect! I could shift my limbs freely this way without exposing my vitals to gunfire!

“Ha, impressed ay’? You didn’t doubt ol’ Socket did you?”

“I’m sorry I doubted you Socket. This suit is perfect.”

“Bah, I’m just glad it’s done, maybe now I can get some shuteye.” He said it gruffly but he was grinning.

“You haven’t slept? Why?”

“Ah, just the ol’ tinker twitch. The material I use for the suits is good fer bullets, an’ fireproof o’ course, but it don’t stretch the way you need it to, had to redo the formula. An’ the damn sleeves I’ve never had to make that way before, twitch wouldn’t let it go before I solved it. The legs’ll split too by the by.”

I locked my leg bones into the new position I had developed while jumping buildings, then gave one a test kick. The suit leggings split to allow for the odd configuration, not hindering the force of the kick and just clinging to the leg until I snapped it back. Then when I folded the leg bones back into a normal disguise configuration the leggings sealed again. It was impossible to tell that they hadn't always been a solid piece.

"Thank you Socket. I owe you one."

"Bah, no ya don't. It's me job. Here, just pass Gregor's suit to him when he comes down, I'm gonna go git me some shuteye," and he passed me a folded suit that was quite a bit larger and thicker than mine before heading out a side passage.

I spent a while trying out the suit, it really was a great design. I also found out that the torso could split in several places around the sides and middle to allow for extra limbs, though not as drastically as the sleeves and leggings. Overall the suit was quite permeable to allow for my shifting, but while I was in my most human shape the suit would provide coverage for everything except my hands and feet, the neckline even met snugly with my mask.

I really liked it. Now I just needed to figure out how to never take it off. It wasn't good to casually wear it around as it was quite obviously a powered minion suit. Maybe I could grow a layer of flesh to cover it up with fake clothes? Anchoring the skin layer properly would be somewhat awkward though… a hard hit might sever it off and make it dissolve... plus shifting it each time I needed to change was rather wasteful...maybe I should just buy some normal clothes?

I was pondering what to do when Gregor finally showed up. He was

walking with Pebbles and two other minions in black masks I recognized as Fred and Brilla, members of team three. Pebbles was laughing and talking loudly to Gregor, while Fred and Brilla clutched their heads and flinched every time Pebble's booming laugh came forth. After the third time Brilla elbowed him in the ribs, but it seemed to hurt her elbow more than it affected Pebbles. They made their way over to me.

"Morning Tofu," said Gregor, "Have you seen Socket? Sent me a message saying I should come in and try my suit."

"Good morning, Socket went to get some sleep, but he told me to give you this," and I handed him the bundled suit.

"Ha, with Socket Christmas always comes early," said Pebbles. "Hey Tofu, I was offering to show Gregor west Ashwood proper, you in?"

"In what?"

"For some fun, what else! We'll have to do a little grunt work, but I guarantee you'll get to test yer new toy there."

Oh! A weapons test with allies around. That would be nice.

"I'll go."

"HA! That's the spirit!" Fred and Brilla flinched, and Brilla slapped the back of his helmet this time. "Ach, not my fault you two can't drink right."

Gregor tested his suit while Pebbles went to clear the mission. For my part I continued testing my range of movement in the suit. I wanted to make sure I had all the splitting points memorized so I could thrust a knife through without poking or tearing a hole in my own suit. Once Gregor was done changing he also tested his suit with stretches

that Adder had taught us, and we chatted about the company dinner from yesterday.

"Yeah, I wasn't sure about this whole minion business at first, but I'm definitely eating a lot better," said Gregor.

"Indeed, the Kobe beef was quite delicious."

"Told ya."

After a little while Pebbles came back, and waved us over to him.

"Alright, I got us cleared to go, but Sandra said if I'm taking you two then we might as well grab Ifrit and make it a real training run. We'll wait for her and then take off."

He led us to one of the larger vans, and while Pebbles told us an 'anecdote' of one time he went to W15, Ifrit showed up and walked quickly to reach us.

"Hey there princess, you ready to rumble?" said Pebbles.

"*Don't* call me that," replied Ifrit in her rasping voice.

"Haha, they grow up so fast. Why, I remember when you were yea high and used to tell everyone you were definitely going to be a prin-" Pebbles was cut off when Ifrit held out her gauntleted hand and a small flame ignited in her palm.

"Hahaha alright alright," laughed Pebbles, "everyone in the van, let's blow this Popsicle stand."

The four of us entered the van and Pebbles started the engine.

“Are the other minions not coming?” I asked.

“Nah, most of team three is too hungover, and the other teams have their own shit to work on. No worries, we’ll pick up Buzzer and Olson and make a real party out of it.”

This time we didn’t use the elevator, instead Pebbles drove us up a side tunnel that exited into an unassuming alleyway. I was starting to see why Central didn’t like modifications to the infrastructure. With how widespread these tunnels were they probably caused a lot of trouble for cops and heroes.

The first person we picked up was Olson, wearing his customary red shirt and jeans. He was standing casually on the sidewalk and wearing his mask when we picked him up, which I thought was odd.

“Isn’t it dangerous to just stand around with a mask on?”

“Nah, we’re like three blocks from Ashwood St.” replied Pebbles. “Besides, what they gonna do, arrest him for wearing a generic mask? Interesting headwear ain’t illegal.”

The next person we picked up was short and thin, and while he was also waiting on the sidewalk with his mask on, he was constantly checking his surroundings and looking over his shoulder nervously. Much more what I expected from a lone minion in the open by themself. We opened the side door to let him in.

“Hey Pebbles,” he said, “ So where’s this mixer taking place… wait a minute, aren’t you all the newbies? Oh no, I didn’t sign up for a damn traini-”

Pebbles just laughed as he grabbed who I assumed was Buzzer and hauled him into the van one-handed, sprawling him across the floor and gunning the engine before we even had the door closed. Buzzer eventually righted himself, cursing at Pebbles the whole time (or at least I think he was? I didn’t recognize any of the words), but after he calmed down he introduced himself.

“Name’s Buzzer. I do the info work for team three. You need an ear on the street you come to me.”

“Just don’t ask him where to find the next big score.”

“Shut your pie-hole Pebbles! Who asked you!”

Pebbles just laughed and gunned the engine again.

Pebbles drove the van along towards the ‘ground floor’ of Ashwood St. I had never seen this area before because I tended to avoid the ground floor areas near Ashwood, but apparently the area directly below Ashwood St. was a high speed road for cars and trucks. The pillars and anchor points for the above structures lined the sides of the three lane road, and only in rare places did natural sunlight make it through from the two floors above. Using this ‘freeway’ we made quick time heading west under Ashwood St.

Eventually Pebbles exited the freeway and drove to a ‘parking garage’, whereupon we exited the van as a group and headed for some stairs that would take us to the next level up. If my GPS was

working properly then we were only a few blocks away from the border between E12 and E13. We reached a short, enclosed ‘concrete’ walkway, and continued across it to the level two area of Ashwood St.

And there things changed considerably.

So far the architecture had been rather uniform throughout E13, with slight variations depending on the area. North of Ashwood St. you could see lots of signs of patchwork repair and modification. South of Ashwood St. there were less modifications, and the uniform buildings were broken up by warehouse areas the farther south you went. On Ashwood St. level three was mostly stores, offices, and entertainment areas like the arcade or ‘theaters’.

But here? I couldn’t tell what anything was. Signs and lights (mostly neon) were absolutely everywhere, advertizing things I didn’t understand, and the architectural style seemed to change from building to building. Here a building had an outdoor area with torches and tables, there a building was encased in posters with no way to see in the windows. Most buildings had music and electronic noise similar to the arcade emanating from inside, and the streets were crowded with people.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“This my friends, is the Red Zone. Sandwiched between the freeway below and the family friendly tourist trap above, the Red Zone is E13’s own little highway to hell. Drugs, gambling, prostitution, illegal gizmos, if you want it the Red Zone’s got it,” explained Pebbles as he led us deeper into the level two area.

“It’s also the main reason Hellion’s Henchmen have been at war with the Espada,” interjected Buzzer.

“Ha, not anymore,” replied Pebbles.

“Although I’m guessing that’s why you dragged me out of bed this morning?”

“Yep, standard patrol of the Red Zone, we get to see the sights and get paid to boot, don’t that sound great?”

“Damnit Pebbles, dragging me out here for damned legwork, and after all the favors I do for you! You still haven’t paid me back for that time at the Cyborg Pand-”

Suddenly Pebbles grabbed Buzzer and dragged him ahead of the rest of us.

“Hey hey, I thought we agreed that was between us yeah? Come on, when we’re done I’ll introduce you to…” the rest was too muffled for me to make out over the sounds coming from the nearby establishments. Something about a girl named Amber? I was more interested in this faction war Buzzer mentioned. Eventually the two of them appeared to come to a resolution and Pebbles turned back to us.

“Alright, here’s the game plan. Now that the Espada have been dealt with we’re gonna do a patrol of the Red Zone, let the locals know Hellion’s Henchmen are out and about and it’s business as usual. Any troubles come along you have permission to give it the beatdown, if you think you can’t handle it call me with your masks, make sure you’re set to channel three shortwave. As for groups let’s see… we’ll go me n' Ifrit, Gregor and Olson, and Tofu/Buzzer. We’ll meet outside the RedFin in say two hours or so, you remember where that is Olson?”

“Kinda hard to forget.”

“HA! True that. Alright let’s get going. Try not to get lost boneheads.”

We split up after that, each pair going a separate way. As I walked with Buzzer he turned to me and said, “Alright, since I’m already out here you and me are gonna visit my contacts, see what the situation’s like. Now that the Espada have been dealt a death blow whatever's left will be scurrying for the sewers or looking for payback. Let’s make sure it’s the former.”

Buzzer proceeded to lead me to several different business establishments (and a few back alleys) to meet with different ‘informants’. Between stops I asked him questions about the feud between Hellion’s Henchmen and the Espada.

“So, this war with the Espada has been going on a long time now?” I asked.

“Yeah, they’ve been trying to muscle into E13 from E12 for about the past three years now,” answered Buzzer. “You see, the Red Zone is the main source of income for this sector, it’s what keeps E13 from being a complete poorhouse like the other outer sectors. Gambling, drugs, and prostitution are legal here, which draws in big money from the richer inner sectors. Hellion gets a cut from every business and villain that operates along Ashwood St. and in exchange Hellion’s Henchmen makes sure things stay relatively safe and stable.”

“And the Espada wanted to control this resource?”

“Exactly. But really they’re just the latest in a long line of chumps trying to muscle in without a clue. See the thing is controlling the Red Zone, and E13 with it, is a delicate balancing act. Too much crime, or the Red Zone leaking out of level two, and Central will bring down the hammer. Then the heroes starve out the Red Zone, and the sector dies as its lifeblood is cut off, even as Central touts their ‘lowest crime rate ever’ bullshit. Hellion’s been the only one with the power, smarts, and connections to wrangle the Red Zone and keep the heroes out of it at the same time, which is why outside

groups trying to worm their way in always fail."

"If that's the case, why has this war lasted so long?"

"Simply put? Blind luck and purist bullshit. The last Odd Summer three years ago saw a lot of good powers pop up in E12, and the Espada scooped them up fast, becoming a real contender almost overnight. Odd Summer tends to redraw lines that way. Then when they had a firm grasp on E12 they set their sights on the only real source of profit around, the Red Zone. Thing is Hellion isn't just any ol' villain. Renting minions to other villains means you have big clients and big connections, the Espada were doomed from the start even if they didn't know it. Only reason they lasted this long is because some of their leadership got the bright idea to use purist propaganda to fuel recruitment, and badda-bing badda-boom, a big swath of idiot cannon fodder to keep between them and Hellion's crosshairs. For all the good it did them in the end."

"I see. I hadn't realized these faction wars would get so complicated."

"Heh, no worries. You came in at a good time, Hellion blew up most of their leadership Sunday night, so now all that's left is the unpowered fodder. We'll mop up any too dumb to scurry away and then it's back to business as usual until the next chumps try to take a swing."

Buzzer and I continued to visit his contacts until one of them, a 'working girl', gave him what he seemed to think was a good lead, and we headed towards the "Redfin" to meet up with the others. When we arrived Pebbles and Ifrit were already standing outside what appeared to be a restaurant, with the symbols "RedFin" on display in unmissable neon lights over the doorway.

Maybe we'd be able to stop to eat?

Buzzer started talking to Pebbles about the information he found, but

admittedly I was more concerned with trying to see what kind of food was served inside the restaurant. Which was probably why I was the first to see the strange creature that crashed through the front window and land on the sidewalk outside, eliciting screams from the surrounding pedestrians. It had a strange bulbous body with two large eyes, and multiple tentacles lined with suction cups flailed to get purchase and keep it from flopping over.

Estimated threat: medium.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Pebbles sighed before saying, “Probably the lunch special. Ifrit would you handle this? I need to talk to an idiot sushi chef about keeping live ingredients during Odd Summer,” and he casually approached the restaurant entrance and entered.

Ifrit didn’t say anything, simply stepping forward and extending a gauntleted hand. Then from her hand a small ball of flame shot out and swiftly impacted the soft body of the ‘lunch special’, boring a hole into it right between its eyes.

The creature twitched strangely for several moments. Then it exploded, a small fireball propelling parts of it every which way and spattering against some civilians who had been too stupid to vacate the area. The result looked a little like my experiments with the brains.

One charred tentacle piece landed near my feet, so I picked it up and opened the clasps that let me eat with my mask on.

It was pretty good.

...

I think it needs sauce though.

Ch21 Leftovers

“I can’t believe you ate the entire chunk.”

“If you wanted some you should have grabbed it before we left.”

“*No I did not want your disgusting floor sushi!*”

Buzzer seemed to have a real problem with me eating the tentacle piece. I was a bit worried about it at first, but Pebbles just laughed when he found out, and Ifrit didn’t have any real reaction that I could detect. She was silent as usual and with her facial features hidden by the mask it was rather difficult to tell what she might be thinking.

I wish humans used pheromones, it would simplify things. Sure they produced smells, but only two or three seemed to mean anything, and they tended to be redundant. Like broadcasting fear while they died. Of course dying is scary, what was the point of broadcasting it to the organism killing you? It would kind of make sense if other humans could pick up the scent and avoid the area afterwards, but so far the only human with the proper equipment had been the tracker human. So odd.

Either way, eating the tentacle had been worth Buzzer’s complaints. Both the design and codes were unique in comparison to other organisms I had eaten, and I already had several ideas on how to utilize what I learned from it. Shame I couldn’t eat the entire corpse, but as far as I could discern the creature’s size was due to a trigger event, not a random product of mutavus, and I should be able to acquire fresh samples of the original organism later.

Gregor and Olson met up with us, and Pebbles led us back to the van. Apparently Buzzer's contact had given him the location of an Espada safehouse, and Pebbles wanted to "scope the place out." We piled in the van and headed out.

Pebbles drove a few blocks south of Ashwood St, and then west again, into what my map said was E12.

"Just so you guys know, if you get lost your masks won't be able to help you here," said Pebbles. "They only have map functions in E13. You'll have to get at least within three blocks of the border."

"I was under the impression we would not be seeking trouble," replied Gregor.

"Course not, but you never know right? We're just gonna take a looksie, and if we see anything juicy we'll call in a cowl," Pebbles replied.

"Um, I thought the map function had to be approved by a lieutenant?" I interjected.

"Eh? What gave you that idea?"

"Imp said so. He had to give me the directions to the safehouse on the last job."

"Kid, that's just for sending important info over the network, you never know when a technopath is listening in," said Buzzer. "If you want to use the map function just give your mask the address and it'll lead you there."

…I wish I'd known that sooner.

“So, it uses GPS?”

“God no!” cried Buzzer. “The map’s inbuilt to the mask. Uses GPS! Can you imagine? Might as well paint a target on your back and shoot off flares for any passing hero to follow.”

I clicked the GPS feature on my phone off.

“Ah don’t mind him Tofu, we haven’t had a technopath in this sector in years, Buzzer’s just paranoid,” said Pebbles.

“It’s my job to be paranoid! We’ll see how *you* feel when the heroes show up on *your* doorstep!” grumbled Buzzer.

We didn’t go very far into E12. Buzzer directed Pebbles for a few blocks, and then Pebbles pulled into an alley about a block from our destination; a seven story apartment building. Buzzer rolled down a window before saying, “Alright chumps, quiet down for a bit,” and he stuck his hand out the window.

We waited in silence for a few minutes, until Pebbles asked, “Anything?”

“I’m hearing fifteen or so distinct heartbeats in the building,” answered Buzzer, “Most are concentrated on the third floor, talking about random crap, kinda odd for a workday but… ah! One of them cocked a gun, seems we’re on the money.”

This was interesting, Buzzer could hear all that from a block away?

“Alright. I’ll send in confirmation and see how the brass wanna handle this,” said Pebbles.

Pebbles used his mask to send a message, then after a minute turned to us and said, “Okay, seems most of our cowls are tied up right now, so we gotta wait and watch till one can come round.”

“Wonderful, just how I wanted to spend my day,” said Buzzer.

“Ah, stuff a sock in it and keep your ears open.”

To pass the time I decided to try playing Gribblin Tamer on my phone with the sound off. I fiddled with the opening options and managed to get my Gribblin to level two before I was interrupted.

“Ah shit,” said Buzzer suddenly.

“What is it?” asked Pebbles.

“Car just pulled up outside the apartment and I recognize the voices, one of em is Frankie, and it looks like they’ve got Jasper in the car.”

“What?! Are you sure?”

“Yeah, heartbeat is a mutant, and I can hear Jasper’s stupid fake accent even through whatever’s gagging him.”

“Well shit, that’s not good. Let me send a message to base.”

“What’s not good? Mind filling us in?” asked Gregor.

“It’s Jasper, an information broker who works in E13,” answered Buzzer. “He works with us all the time, helped set up the barbeque

on Sunday in fact. I don't know how the Espada caught him, but they hate his guts. They'll make him talk and then they'll kill him regardless of what he says."

No, I couldn't have that. Jasper's information was too valuable, and he was my back-up plan in case I ever needed to disappear and get a new job.

"Then we should go help him," I said.

"Easier said than done," said Buzzer, "Pebbles did they reply yet?"

"Yeah, seems the closest cowl is about an hour out."

A whole hour? From what I remembered of Jasper's previous encounter with Frankie, I wasn't sure he'd last the whole hour in the condition I wanted him in. Frankie hadn't seemed like the patient type.

"I don't think Jasper will last a whole hour."

"...yeah, probably not," said Pebbles, and he started to drum his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Pebbles… you aren't actually thinking of going in without a cowl are you?" asked Buzzer.

"Wellllll, the way I see it we're up against twenty or so goons and Frankie. Any two of us could handle most of the goons, the only problem is Frankie."

"What's Frankie's power?" asked Gregor.

I answered, "He makes blades appear over his forearms, they can cut

through metal easily."

"Oh? You've seen him before?" asked Pebbles.

"And fought him, I helped Jasper on the subway when Frankie found him. He won't be a problem for me."

"HA! You sure get around Tofu. Alright, that means between Tofu and Olson we got two people who can take him without losing an arm."

Buzzer spoke, "Pebbles, even if we can storm the place they'll just slit Jasper's throat to spite us the moment we show our faces. Unless we can get to Jasper quietly there's no point to this."

The van fell into silence at that. Apparently none of them were good at stealth?

"I think I can get to him. I'm a shapeshifter."

Five minion masks turned to me. Ugh, I really didn't like when groups looked at me all at once like that.

"What's your plan?"

"I jump to the roof from the next door apartment, and come in from the top. If Buzzer can guide me I'm reasonably sure I can get to Jasper."

"Wellll, that might work, but if I send you in alone Sandra will tear me a new one."

"I could bring someone? It's not a hard jump."

There was silence for a moment as they considered my plan. Then Olson spoke up, “I can go with him Pebbles. If shit hits the fan it’s not like I’ll die.”

“Ha. Alright then, how about this: Tofu and Olson come in from the top, grab Jasper, and we’ll make a ruckus to cover their escape?”

“What if they have any hidden supers, or if the heroes show up?” asked Gregor.

“And the civilians in the building…” said Ifrit, almost whispering.

“Those would all be problems even with a cowl. Right now the biggest problem is how long Jasper can last with Frankie and a bunch of pissed off gangers,” replied Pebbles.

Gregor and Ifrit took a moment to consider, then Gregor shrugged.

“As long as Frankie gets handled, getting paid to beat up a bunch of mutant haters is fine with me.”

“Ditto,” said Ifrit simply.

“HA! One of the perks of the job for sure. Alright, looks like we are a go.”

Buzzer sighed before saying, “Make sure your masks are set to channel three,” and went back to sticking his hand out the window.

Olson and I exited the van, and walked further down the alley until we reached the “fire escape.” I reached up and pulled down the ladder for Olson, then we made our way up to the roof. We moved to the edge carefully, trying to stay out of line-of-sight of the windows in the apartment across from us.

“You sure you can jump us to the other side?” asked Olson.

“Yes, I’ve done this before. No worries, I won’t drop you.”

“Not me I’m worried about. If we plummet to the street I somehow doubt we’ll get a second chance.”

I went about locking my legs into the jumping position, then I had him climb onto my back and hold on. Once he was settled, I took a few running steps and launched us across the alley to the neighboring roof.

I landed easily, my practice the night before paying off. I let Olson down, snapped my legs back to normal, and we walked over to the maintenance door that would lead us down.

“Can you two hear me?” came Buzzer’s voice suddenly. This must be the shortwave?

“Yeah we can hear you Buzzer,” said Olson.

“Good, there’s no one on the top floor near as I can tell. There’s a couple people in apartments, but I think most of the Espada are on the third floor, that’s where they took Jasper.”

The roof door was locked, but it was flimsy, and it was easy to carve around the door handle.

“Neat trick,” mentioned Olson.

It was, but it would be better if I could pick the locks without damaging them, another reason I would like Jasper undamaged. Maybe if we saved him he would teach me how he did it.

“Say, how thick of a wall could you carve through?”

“Um, I haven’t really tested it. Why?”

“Heh, if you can get through at least a foot or so I might have an idea.”

We made our way down a few flights of stairs, slowly and quietly, but stopped when we got to the fourth floor. Then Olson ‘radioed’ Buzzer again, and asked him to lead us to a spot above the room where they were keeping Jasper. Down a few halls we came to the apartment Buzzer specified, a room 4F. Buzzer confirmed that it was empty and I opened the door by carving around the lock again.

Inside was a lot like what I had seen the time I busted through apartments trying to get away from Magenta, filled with furniture and other various knick-knacks that humans collected, although this one was better organized than the examples I had seen thus far. Olson led us to a room where one piece of furniture dominated the space, a rectangular contraption holding an equally large rectangular cushion and covered in rectangular sheets, with a rectangular pillow near the wall. From the indent in the cushion it was obvious that the owner of the apartment spent a lot of time here, probably sleeping during its rest cycle.

Seriously now, I know humans like rectangles, but this was just taking it too far.

“We above Jasper, Buzzer?” asked Olson.

“Yeah, just about. There’s two people in the room with him, Frankie’s outside the room bitching and moaning right now.”

Olson turned to me, “Well Tofu? Think you can carve through the floor in here?”

I bent down and placed my hand on the floor, and set my micro units towards burrowing a test run. The floor was covered in carpet, and below that it was made of the same concrete that made up most of the city, along with a few miscellaneous support materials. The spike of micro units I sent into the floor descended steadily, until it broke into the room below, I was careful to not let any dust fall from the small hole I made. I couldn’t make a true eye since I didn’t want them to notice, but a simple light detector was easy enough, and I used it to get a general layout of the room. Sure enough, I made out the shape of a green humanoid in a chair that must be Jasper, and two other humanoid shapes that must be the gangers Buzzer mentioned.

“It looks like I can tunnel through the floor just fine. Is there a spot you want me to open the hole?” I asked Olson.

“Close to the door so we can try to block it. Bonus points if you can nail one of the guards with the rubble.”

I plugged the tiny hole I bored, and had Olson help me move the ‘bed’ quietly away from the wall since it was in the way. Then I went about carving the hole, it was slower going than the glass wall had been back at the test chamber. The materials of the floor weren’t uniform, and concrete itself was a blend of different materials, which forced me to use a variety of different micro unit structures to deal with it. Not to mention I had to maintain structural integrity while I did this, it would be disastrous if the section of floor fell before it was

big enough to let us through. Deconstructing inorganic materials was simple enough, but reconstructing them? Painfully difficult. The micro units attached to anything I tried to make and if I didn't keep them connected to my core they would self-destruct. I wound up just brute forcing it by holding parts of the section together with temporary fleshy constructs.

Despite the difficulties I was making decent time. Right up until-

zap

I cut through a metal piece that was apparently a wire charged with electricity! The electric current carried along a large section of micro units and fried them, the ones that weren't destroyed instantly self-destructed a second later. I rushed to repair the damage before anything fell.

"Uh, guys?" came Buzzer's voice over the radio. "Something just happened, the Espada in Jasper's room are complaining that their lights went out? Did something happen?"

"I hit a wire," I replied.

"Well hurry it up then. They think it's the bulb for now, but not all of em are stupid."

Olson turned to me, "How close are you?"

"About three fourths of the way."

"Any way to speed this up?"

"Sugar. If you can find it."

Olson nodded and walked out of the room to find me more fuel, and I sped up my deconstruction of the floor, no longer bothering to properly exchange micro units and instead just discarding them along with the floor material. I burned fuel to keep micro unit production and transportation at a maximum.

Olson came back then with several food items, but one of them turned out to be a bag of raw sugar! With my free hand I grabbed it and started to pour the contents into my mouth.

“Jesus dude, I hope you’re immune to diabetes.”

… humans have too many hang-ups about food.

“Guys! I hate to break up the party but Frankie is sending chumps out to check the building and he’s talking about moving Jasper. It’s now or never,” said Buzzer.

I burned fuel fast, and dumped some sugar straight into the crevice I had carved just to get it to the micro units faster.

“Almost done, get ready to jump in.”

“Alright, I’ll go in first to draw their attention, you get to Jasper and untie him.”

Oh, I wish he had said that *before* I triggered the micro units.

The fleshy constructs I had made self-destructed, and the circular section of floor I was standing on fell through into the room below, with me on it. One human was crushed under the rubble, and once my footing was stable I lashed out my arm and slammed a knife into the neck of the other guard, making sure to open an artery. I heard multiple shouts from outside the room as they heard the crash, and a quick glance at the door showed that luckily it was the kind that swung inward, which meant the rubble was blocking it. The only light in the room was from a dirty window.

Olson jumped down after me and started piling more rubble and furniture by the door, which multiple Espada were pounding on. I moved to Jasper to untie him.

“Well, could have done with a bit more warning, but hey! At least you got the bonus points,” said Olson.

I moved to Jasper. They had put a blindfold and a heavy gag on him, and I pulled them off.

“PLEASE DON’T KILL ME! I’LL TELL YOU ANYTHING YOU WANT!” yelled Jasper the moment I had the gag off him.

“Glad to see you haven’t changed Jasper,” said Olson.

Jasper gazed around blearily before his eyes focused on us. I could understand his confusion, two of his eyes were closed and appeared to be somewhat swollen, with the chitin around a third one cracked

and leaking.

“Well I’ll be, is that you Olson? I heard you were back in the game. And Hellion’s Henchmen came to save me, why, I knew I could count on Hellion to look out for a friend. Did you know me and her go way back, all the way to-”

“Save the spiel Jasper. It’s nice to see you too, but this isn’t the right location for reminiscing.”

“Er, right, quite right. Ah! Thank you my good man.” Jasper said as I released the last of the ropes binding him.

“I met you on the subway, my name’s Tofu. Thank you for the job information, it worked out quite well.”

“On the subway… OH! The kid! And here you are saving me again! Such a small world.”

“GUYS! Focus! Get Jasper up through the hol-”

Olson didn’t get to finish his sentence, because just then a glowing green blade punctured right through the door, propped up furniture, and Olson’s chest, killing him instantly.

Then Olson grabbed a nearby chair and tried to prop it over the door, but a second green blade slashed through and took off his head, killing him instantly.

After that failed, Olson resorted to just hucking pieces of rubble through the opening Frankie was making in the barricade.

“Now’s a good time to start moving guys!” said Olson.

ERROR!

Processing…

ERROR!

I pulled my gaze away from Olson and started helping Jasper to the hole we had made in the ceiling. Every time Olson did… *whatever* he was doing… it threw my calculations out of order. It was *very* confusing, and I ***really*** wanted to know how he was doing that!

I locked my legs for jumping, then used them and my arms to boost Jasper up and out of the hole I had made. Then once I was through myself I reached down to pull Olson out as well.

“Um, Olson? How did you do that?”

“It’s my power. Escape now, explain later.”

Good point.

We exited the apartment and hurried down the hallway heading towards the stairway, but before we got there a large group of humans rounded the corner, saw us, and one immediately pulled out a gun and started firing. Olson and I stepped in front of Jasper to provide cover. Several bullets hit me, but none of them penetrated the suit! It really worked!

“Back down the hall! There should be a second stairwell! Yo Buzzer, how’s that distractionary ruckus coming along?” yelled Olson.

We started running back down the hallway and after a few seconds Buzzer responded, “Yeaahhh, about that. A second car showed up, did you know Sanguine is still alive? I didn’t.”

“Buzzer if you’re joking I swear to God-”

“I’m not. I don’t know how that fossil survived the barbeque, but he’s outside the building. Ifrit is throwing fireballs at him, but she’ll be out of juice soon and the rest of us can’t get close.”

“Who is Sanguine?” I asked.

“He’s one of the Espada’s leaders and he can control blood. All he has to do is cut you, and if you’re in range he bleeds you dry,” explained Olson as we ran, “Unfortunately that means I’m a liability now. If I get cut he’ll just have an infinite blood supply.”

Well that wasn’t good.

We rounded a corner and came into sight of the second stairwell. Unfortunately we heard more humans coming up this one as well.

“The roof. As long as you can get Jasper safely over to the next building we should be fine,” said Olson.

We started running up the stairs, but Jasper started to lag behind from his injuries, and I had to carry him ‘piggyback’ like I did with Olson, using the jumping configuration of my legs to make climbing the stairs with him easier. We made better time this way, and we got

to the seventh floor when Olson rounded the next bend and a glowing green blade took him in the gut.

Olson staggered, and Frankie kicked him, knocking him back down the stairs towards me. I caught Olson, and backed down the stairs so I could drop both Olson and Jasper on the landing. Olson was wheezing and bleeding badly, why wasn't his power working?

"Well well, seems I get to bag three cockroaches instead of one today," said Frankie, smiling. He stood at the top of the stairs, and a small group of Espada were behind him. None of these ones had guns luckily.

"How'd you get ahead of us?"

Frankie laughed, and some of the goons chuckled. "It's called an elevator idiot. If you're not gonna use your brain how about I get rid of it for you? Just hold still and try not to bleed on my jacket."

Of course! A building this size would undoubtedly have an elevator somewhere. I felt a bit embarrassed that I hadn't thought of it myself.

Frankie started to descend the stairs with his blades out. He probably should have waited until the goons behind us caught up and surrounded us however. Stairs aren't very good footing for a fight.

Increasing reaction speed to 200%, 60 second burn.

When he got close enough I snapped an arm out and grabbed his foot, yanking it out from under him. He cursed and tried to swing at me as he fell, but with my other hand I grabbed his wrist away from the blade, and when he swung with the other arm I released his foot and grabbed that arm too. Then I pressed a foot into his chest to knock some of the air out of him and get him to stop struggling. This was *so* much easier when I wasn't half starved.

"Back up or he dies," I said to his approaching goons, and I slid a knife out of my foot to poke Frankie in the neck.

They stopped and hesitated, unsure whether it was worth charging me anyways.

"Back **-cough-** back up you morons!" yelled Frankie, and this time they did.

Now what to do about Olson? Whatever Jasper was doing looked like it was only making it worse, and Olson was struggling and trying to say something unsuccessfully with his injured diaphragm. I clicked the switch in my mask and radioed Buzzer.

"Hey Buzzer? Do you know why Olson's power would stop working?"

"WHAT!? Is he **dead** dead?"

"No, but he's bleeding out and I don't know how to help him."

"Satan's icy tits, this is why I hate training runs. Just kill him, he can't reset if he doesn't die. And hurry up! Ifrit ran out of juice and we need to leave."

Oh. I guess that made sense with what I had seen.

I dragged Frankie over to Olson and stabbed him with one of the blades Frankie had yet to disperse. Instantly Olson was back on his feet and completely okay.

ERROR!

Damn that was hard to watch, even when I knew it was coming.

“Ugh, finally! Jasper what the hell? You know how this works,” complained Olson.

“I was trying! Not everyone is good at violence. I’m a businessman, not some common *thug*.”

“*Jesus*, come on. We need to hurry.”

The rest of the Espada caught up, but using Frankie as a hostage we were able to make our way to the top floor, Frankie muttering curses the entire way while I poked at him with the knife. As we reached the final landing before the roof access, we heard an almost innocuous **ding.**

Down the hallway opposite the stairwell, an elevator I hadn’t noticed when we first came through opened up. Inside was a human, and it was… shriveled. It was hunched over and using a stick to help move. Its skin was wrinkled and what little hair it had was gray and stringy.

Maybe it was sick? But the glare it gave us was very much alive.

And the small floating cloud of red liquid around it meant this must be Sanguine.

Estimated threat: High.

“Stay back! Or I’ll kill Frankie!”

Sanguine just sneered and shuffled forward. Apparently he didn’t value Frankie as much as his underlings did.

“Hey Tofu,” said Olson, “Since Sanguine is up here I’m gonna go jump off the roof, I don’t want to risk him catching me. Will you be fine?”

“Yeah, I can toss Frankie and then jump Jasper over.” I replied.

Unfortunately I couldn’t just gut Frankie and run, I didn’t want to give Sanguine more ammo, so I had to drag a suddenly struggling Frankie along with me. Fortunately I was stronger than him, and Sanguine was rather slow himself, so I was able to get out onto the roof with Jasper. Olson having already jumped over the edge.

I leaned over for Jasper to get on my back again, and he clambered on. Of course, Frankie chose the moment I was off balance from Jasper to lash at me with a blade, cutting a gash in my arm (*and my suit! I just got it!*). I felt the drain of blood instantly, a stream of it

leaving my arm towards Sanguine, and suddenly I found myself struggling with both Frankie and blood loss. I sealed off the injury and brought Frankie under control, but Sanguine now had a much larger cloud of blood surrounding him.

Which worked out in my favor when the micro units in the blood self-destructed, showering Sanguine in a dust cloud and sending him into a coughing fit. Time to go.

I ran for the edge of the roof and jumped. Both Jasper and Frankie screamed as I launched the three of us over the edge and to the opposite roof. Admittedly the landing was a bit awkward, considering I was carrying two of them and was suffering blood loss. Once we landed I secured Frankie and let Jasper down, before checking to make sure that Sanguine wasn't following us somehow. No, he seemed to be stuck on the opposite roof, and since I heard sirens in the background I doubted he'd be concerned with us for much longer. We had to hurry ourselves to meet up with Pebbles and the others.

“Well, that was quite the heart pounder,” said Jasper when he finally stopped gasping. “Not that I’m ungrateful mind you, but why did you drag Frankie along?”

“He cut my suit, so I wanted him to pay me back.”

Jasper gave me a funny look before saying, “Er, i don’t think Frankie is much inclined to do that…”

“Oh I know, I just didn’t want to drop him and get blood on his jacket.”

Well, my jacket now.

Ch22 Jailhouse Rock Candy

It was a behemoth… relatively. It was hexagonal, shaped somewhat like a spider with five “legs” coming off the hexagon corners, and with an array of sucrose rods coming off the sixth corner that formed the “abdomen.” All in all, the micro unit was just large enough to wrap its legs around a fat cell if it needed to. It was one of the largest micro unit models available.

It was just finished being assembled, and as the last of the sucrose rods was placed the complicated assemblage of wound-up molecules that made up its center was given a **tap**, activating it and setting the micro unit into motion. Disengaging from its mount, it was swept into the outgoing flow of micro units and into the bloodstream, along with thousands of its fellow units that had just been completed inside the factory.

It flowed down the bloodstream quickly. This particular model of micro unit had thirty seconds of self-sustained operation time before it self-destructed, seventy seconds if it consumed the sucrose it carried itself, but that would likely be unnecessary. Instead it bounced along the bloodstream, collecting a few errant nutrients out of the blood for itself, and then was shunted into an area of operation well before even half its minimum time was up.

Once it was latched onto the nearest tissue wall, the micro unit began receiving the signal from the core directly through the nerve cells, and its tinker-designed inner mechanisms were able to rewind themselves, halting and restarting the countdown on its self-destruction. Normally at this point it would begin breaking the sucrose rods with its inner mechanism and passing the resulting energy to other micro units that needed the boost with a **tap**, or it

would begin dismantling the cells of whatever organism it was invading and would burn the rods itself for additional operation time or speed. In this particular instance the mission was something a bit outside its normal operating protocols.

It crawled along the mass of tissue, the cells under its “feet” helping to carry it along and speed its journey to its target destination. Upon arrival, it approached a gathering of thousands of other micro units of various models, some much smaller than itself, who were working next to a (relatively) massive wall of inorganic molecules. This molecular wall was part of a foreign object that the micro units were attempting to repair.

The unit stopped in front of a section of wall and waited while a recycler unit assembled the next molecule to add from base atoms. It obtained these atoms from its own internal supply, or had porter units pass it needed materials, all of which were added to the large drum that made up most of its 'body'. Completing the molecule, the recycler then unfolded to allow the oversized molecule to exit the drum, and the molecule was passed to several porter units to place in the appropriate spot on the wall.

Now came the difficult part. The oversized molecule had to be threaded into the pattern of other molecules on the wall just so, and then it had to be bonded to a second molecule to complete the pattern and solidify its placement. While a recycler unit performed the bonding process, the large, spider-like tapper unit that had just arrived **snapped** a sugar molecule, and used the resulting energy to recharge the recycler that oversaw the bonding, as performing a function outside its design was consistently causing the recycler's inner mechanism to wind-down too quickly.

It was a difficult process; the micro units were designed for gathering

materials and passing them to each other or to cells, placing said materials into an unaffiliated structure that didn't receive the core signal was outside of their intended design, and the fact that most of the work was done at an atomic level meant the micro units had to be careful to not accidentally bond themselves to the wall. Nevertheless, despite the massive expenditure of energy, the micro units were making slow but steady progress.

Maybe the energy added to the recycler was timed badly. Maybe the operator modules hadn't spaced the micro units correctly. Maybe the operation was taking place too close to the layer of skin that separated the cells and micro units from the outside world.

Or maybe the recycler placed a carbon atom a lit~tle too far to the left.

Whatever the cause, a massive bolt of lightning (really just a tiny static zap) lanced through the work area, killing cells and destroying micro units. Normally it wouldn't have been that bad, happened all the time, but in this instance it caused tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of micro units to accidently bond with the wall they were trying to repair. This damaged the wall, and damaged it again when the fused micro units jammed, failed to receive a signal through any connecting tissue, and then self-destructed, breaking down large pieces of the wall as they destroyed themselves and anything attached to them.

All in all, the tiny little static shock had destroyed most, if not all, of the work done to try and repair the suit Socket had given me.

Estimated time to full repair: 16 days;

What was the proper curse to use in this situation? Damn it all? Goddamnit? Stripped screws and blasted bolts? Infernal machine? All of these and more were phrases Socket yelled when he was frustrated with his tools, but I wasn't sure if there was a specific one that was meant for just this situation. Probably... goddamnit? Yeah, that seemed right.

Goddamnit.

I was in the van with the other minions and Jasper. While Olson was recounting our rescue of Jasper (with frequent interruptions from said individual), I had been trying to repair my suit, to little success. The molecules that made it up were too complex, and arranged in a strange, interwoven pattern that increased the suit's impact absorption properties, but made repairing it terribly difficult for my micro units. Construction at a molecular level is different from normal. You can't handle atoms and molecules without forming some kind of bond to other atoms and molecules, and the micro units were having difficulty 'letting go' of the materials. Not normally a problem when I was just passing materials among my own parts.

And to be honest, even if I had micro unit designs that were better adapted for this type of work, I didn't have enough of the required base elements to patch up the hole anyways. Frankie's power hadn't just cut the suit, it had vaporized a hole through it, which meant I couldn't just rebond one side of the tear to the other. I'd have to simply hope that Socket was willing to repair the damage.

And I just got it too…

Even worse was that the jacket Frankie had worn turned out to be unusable. I thought it was perfect as it had been baggy enough to fit over my suit, but Jasper had warned me against it as apparently several of the symbols embedded or printed onto it were considered “highly offensive” to mutants. After finding that out, I was just about ready to toss Frankie over the side of the building when Jasper gave me some valuable advice.

“Tofu, we’re in the clear now, don’t bother with him. Just let the police handle that ruffian.”

“Isn’t he a threat? I could get rid of him.”

“Kids shouldn’t trouble themselves with those kinds of thoughts. Besides, even if you killed him there's always another goon willing to take his place.”

Absolutely brilliant. Jasper was right, I had been thinking of threats in the terms of singular opponents. This city was huge, and trying to remove every threat one at a time was a foolish endeavor, if it was even possible. But Frankie was a minor threat. I could easily beat him if I needed to, and if I let him live he would use up resources that other threats might use to grow. Especially from the ‘police’ and hero factions. They loved taking prisoners for whatever reason, and that had to be a large expenditure of resources. Leave it to Jasper to take a concept used for controlling single cell organism populations and apply it to a macro scale. I’d need to “step up my game” as Tim and Mikey sometimes said.

While I pondered Jasper’s advice and micro unit efficiency, Olson wrapped up our side of the event for the other minions.

“Ha. Good work boneheads, what’d I tell ya, piece of cake,” said Pebbles as Olson finished.

“Piece of cake my ass! Sanguine nearly got us!” replied Buzzer.

“Ah Ifrit had it handled, ain’t that right prin- er, Ifrit. Just work on your aim next time, you’ll get a reputation for property damage like your mum if you don’t haha.”

“I was trying not to hit civilians…” muttered Ifrit.

“Well, at least we all got out of that shit-show alive,” grumbled Buzzer.

“Exactly! And that’s all that matters,” said Pebbles, “Come on, I don’t know about you guys, but henching always makes me hungry. Lets go give the guys at a drive-through a scare. How’s Mega-Burger sound? My treat.”

It sounded great to me. For the next few minutes we talked about different things that happened on the mission, and Jasper went into a *very* long retelling of how he got captured. Because of this, it was when he was standing in the somewhat open space in the back of the van to ‘pantomime’ an “important” part of his tale that the van shook, and Jasper was thrown off his feet.

“Oof, careful with those brakes please Pebbles, I’ve been quite shaken around enough as it is,” said Jasper as he recovered his footing.

“Uh, yeah, see, a bit of bad news that. That wasn’t the brakes. We might have to take a rain check on those burgers.”

The other minions and I looked at each other before crowding at the front of the van so we could see through the windshield. In front of the van were several humans in masks and colorful outfits. One of which was using a tendril of what appeared to be animated water to keep the van from moving.

Heroes.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"*Well*," said Buzzer as he pointed from one figure to another (he sounded irritated), "considering that's Hydrox, *that* is Ferrosa, and *that* is god-damned Suprex, we are going to raise our hands, surrender, cooperate with *anything* they say that isn't 'take off your mask', and hope to high hell that Sandra sends someone to post our bail."

I wasn't sure I liked this plan.

"No worries gentlemen, I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding," said Jasper as he rubbed his hands together, "Just let ol' Jasper clear this whole thin-"

Whatever he said next was drowned out in a chorus of "No!".

Precinct E12-M Police Department:

It was going to be one of those days.

"*Please* put *all* items in the bin."

"But they're my knives."

“*Yes*. I *know* that. Put them in the bin, and they will be *returned* to you, when you *leave*,” said Officer Barget for what felt like the millionth time. God he hated working with supers. The masked minion he was talking to was one of the infamous Hellion’s Henchmen, and just like every other loon to ever put on a mask, it seemed like his purpose in life was to piss Barget off. He wished it was the heroes’ job to deal with the aftermath of their escapades, or at least deal with some of the paperwork.

“Can’t I just keep them?”

“Tofu, put the damn knives in the bin before you get shot,” said one of the other masked minions waiting to get processed. The minion Barget was dealing with sullenly placed three knives into the bin, where he had already deposited some loose change, a phone, several pieces of what might have once been a revolver, and *seventeen goddamn shivs* made from various bits of metal. What was it about the masks who used knives that made them extra crazy? What, did he think he could use them all at once? Where was he even keeping them?

After Barget was finally done with “Tofu” the next minion stepped up in line, this one wearing red metal gauntlets.

“Any items you have on your person in the bin, gloves too.”

“I’m not taking my gloves off, they’re for a medical condition,” she instantly recited.

Barget fought to keep his temper.

Gregor

Gregor was seated in in a chair that was far too small for his eight-foot frame. He sighed, and would have added his current seating situation to the list of things that irritated him about his mutation, except that 'tiny furniture' had already been added long ago. He crossed his arms and tried to pay attention to the detective sitting across the table from him.

“So, you are Mr. Gregory Dyson I presume?”

“No, I am Gregor,” he replied.

“So, you aren’t the Gregory Dyson that was stabbed during a mugging last year and mutated to be eight feet tall with green scales?” asked the detective while he read from a file.

“I have never met this Mr. Gregory Dyson you speak of. My name is Gregor.”

“Okay cut the crap. You’re obviously Gregory Dyson. There aren’t *that* many mutants who fit that description in E13.”

“Detective, if you are basing your conclusion on my appearance then I must protest this terrible case of profiling.”

“Look here you hissing son of a bi-”

“Detective,” interrupted a man who had opened the door to the interview room. He gestured for the detective to come with him, and the detective left with him after glaring a final time at Gregor.

Gregor sighed again, not bothering to prevent it from fading into a hiss this time. He thought he’d been doing a pretty good job of

keeping the hiss out of his voice, but it was always there, a strange undertone to his words that made them sound like he was imitating a snake, of all the stupid things.

He would have added it to the list, but again, it was already on there.

Buzzer

“I’m not saying a damn thing until you tell me what I’m being arrested for and let me call my lawyer!”

“Mr... Buzzer, was it? You haven’t been arrested. You’ve been detained as a person of interest related to the firebombing that took place earlier today.”

“Well in *that* case, I’m not saying a **damn** thing until you let me call my lawyer!”

“Sir I doubt that will be necessary.”

“Necessary my foot! I know how this works. I haven’t done nothing and you’ve got nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say nothing, a van full of minions near the scene of a crime is a cause for concern.”

“Minions? Minions!? Who said anything about minions? We were out for lunch!”

“You’re wearing a mask.”

“And? Is that a crime?”

“Well, seems to me most people don’t pile into an unmarked van wearing masks to simply, ‘get lunch’.”

“And it seems to me that I have yet to be able to call my **god damned lawyer!**”

“There’s no need to shout sir.”

“I’ll yell as much as I want! This is the Americas!”

The detective sent to deal with Buzzer rubbed at his temples, obviously developing a headache, which was partly due to the frustration of dealing with the obnoxious individual in front of him, but was *mostly* due to the subsonic frequencies Buzzer was pumping into the room. If there was one thing Buzzer knew, it was that a distracted opponent, was an easy opponent. He only hoped the newbies would be able to keep their mouths shut until Sandra could spring them from this mess Pebbles had dragged him into.

Tofu

“My name is Tofu, my favorite food is tofu burgers, I am *definitely* eighteen years of age or older, I don’t like rats, or yellow-furred animals that have large claws, or guns that are pointed at me, and I like sugar, and rectangular objects just like everyone else. Can I have the donuts now?"

“Uh, um, sure kid. One sec,” said the detective as he hurried to scribble down what the kid was saying, “I just have a few more questions and then you can have the donuts. Do you have a name I can call you?”

“My name is Tofu, I said that.”

“I mean a real name, not a moniker.”

“It’s Tofu.”

“...right, um. Do you have any parents I can call? Where are you from?”

“My parents cannot be called, but I am from Fortress City.”

“...kid, this isn’t the time for jokes, this is a very serious situation you’re in. Hellion’s Henchmen are bad people and if you associate with them you’re headed for a hard life. Look, if you work with us here maybe we can cut you a deal. You’re wearing one of their powered masks, we could probably get you into the sidekick program. It’s not too late to join the heroes, be on the right side of the law, what do you say?”

...

“May I *please* have the donuts now?”

Ifrit

Ifrit sat with her arms crossed, tapping the tips of her gauntleted fingers one at a time to produce a quiet but steady rhythm where the metal clad fingertips met the material of her suit.

“There’s no reason to be nervous miss.”

She didn't answer, continuing to tap her fingers.

"I'd like to ask you some questions if you don't mind."

Again, no response.

"You put down your name as Ifrit, that's a moniker I'm assuming? How long have you been associated with Hellion's Henchmen?"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Seems like an interesting vocation for a young lady to get into so early in life."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"It can't be easy, working with such dangerous criminals, mutants, monsters."

The tapping stopped, and was replaced with the sound of screeching metal as Ifrit closed the fingers she had been tapping into a tight fist.

cough "Right, well. I'll… be right back, forgot a file."

He didn't come back. And Ifrit resumed her tapping.

Jasper

"...and then when my situation seemed most dire, they swooped in and rescued me in my time of need. Delivering me from the clutches of those dastardly ruffians."

"So, you're saying you were rescued from the Espada. By Hellion's Henchmen."

"I know not who my rescuers were, for they wore masks, but I can assure you that by the caliber of their actions they were heroes one and all. Without them I would surely have perished."

"They were wearing Hellion's Henchmen masks. They're *still* wearing the masks, they refuse to take them off."

"As they should! By the laws of Fortress City wearing a mask to protect one's identity is legally allowed. Amendment five, subsection C, clause two is the specific rule you're looking for I believe."

"Damnit Jasper, you're in here every other week with a new accent and a new scheme. I've got mountains of paperwork without adding your shenanigans to the pile."

"Detective Mullaney I assure you that I am entirely on the up and up. Your paranoia speaks to me of stress. Are you overworking yourself? Com'on, you can tell Ol' Jasper. How are the wife and kids by the way? You told me little Ricky was in the science fair if I remember correctly, how did that turn out?"

Detective Mullaney buried his face in his hands and complained

about the science fair.

Olson

“So, the infamous ‘Red Shirt’ minion. Never thought I’d get lucky enough to book you.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but my name’s Olson. Easy mistake, lots of people with red shirts out there. Besides, I heard that guy died.”

“Well *I’ve* heard he walked it off.”

“Couldn’t tell you sir.”

“So you’re telling me if someone shot you right now you wouldn’t just bounce right up, proving that you are one of Hellion’s Henchmen.”

“I sincerely doubt it, but don’t take my word for it. Go ahead and test it. Of course, if you’re wrong…”

The detective couldn’t see the grin on Olson’s face. But he could definitely hear it in his damned smug voice.

Pebbles

“Can you at least confirm whether or not ‘Pebbles’ is your real name or a moniker?”

Pebbles sat unresponding, with his arms crossed, leaning back in his chair, and the detective across from him was starting to lose his patience. Pebbles was a known entity to the E12 police departments. And the E13 police departments. And the police departments of almost a dozen other sectors. Normally that would have been enough to book both him and the other minions he was caught with, but unfortunately *this* time he hadn’t been caught commiting a crime. Which meant that despite matching the description for one Seth “Pebbles” Kelmet, by the laws of Fortress City unless they got an admittance that he was either Seth Kelmet *or* the minion known as Pebbles they couldn’t actually arrest him, only hold him temporarily as a person of interest. Once upon a time a physical description might have been enough, but Odd Summer had ruined that reality, and Fortress City had accepted the new reality with accommodating laws and a fanfare of red tape.

The detective kept trying to cajole a response, *any* response, out of the frustratingly mute minion, but he hadn’t had any luck. Pebbles just sat there, staring from behind his mask and making the detective more and more frustrated. Pebbles and his group hadn’t been operating with a super villain, and this was the perfect opportunity to put away some minions for good if he could just get a *sliver* of evidence that they were really minions working with Hellion’s Henchmen, and not just idiots in masks out for lunch like they claimed.

Suddenly Pebbles muttered something. The detective stopped mid-word and leaned in to hear what he was saying. He’d take even insults as opposed to silence at this point.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that, what did you say?”

Pebbles was silent for a moment before he spoke again, but again it was too quiet for the detective to hear.

“I’m sorry, could you speak up a little?”

Pebbles continued trying to talk, but the detective still couldn’t make out the words. Was something wrong with Pebble’s voice? He stood up from his chair and leaned in, trying to catch whatever it was Pebbles was trying to say.

“…zzz…”

What?

“…zZz…”

The son of a bitch was *asleep*!

“WAKE UP!” yelled the detective as he slammed his fist on the table. Pebbles heard that one at least, and overbalanced in his chair a bit as he woke up, luckily failing to topple over.

“Wuh, what? Did they post bail already?”

The detective grit his teeth and said, “You were *never* under arrest. You are being detained as a person of interest on the recommendation of an accredited hero.”

“Oh, right right,” said Pebbles as he settled back into his chair, “Mind keeping it down until it’s time to leave?”

The detective was about to lose a gasket before there was a polite knock at the door. In stepped a woman in a nice suit and carrying a briefcase who the detective didn’t recognize, but Pebbles certainly did. Seemed Sandra had personally shown up to extricate them.

“Hello there detective, my name is Sandra Baker, I’m here to speak to my client, would you mind if we had a moment alone?”

“Um, I’m not exactly finished with -”

“No problem at all, it’ll only take a minute or two.”

A flustered detective was somehow convinced that vacating the room was in his best interests. And then Sandra turned to Pebbles, who was suddenly sitting a lot straighter than he had been. She moved to the table and commandeered the detective’s abandoned seat.

“Well, seems you’ve had quite the adventure,” said Sandra cooly, while she put her briefcase up on the table. Inside were some legal documents, but most of the briefcase was taken up by jamming equipment to keep their conversation from being overheard or recorded.

“Um, heh. Not, not really? It seemed pretty normal.”

“Oh that’s right. You signed up for a simple training mission. An easy patrol through the Red Zone to show them the area. Nothing really exciting about that.”

“Well, y’see, there were a few complications…”

“I am *well* aware. Honestly Pebbles, going in without a cowl? The Espada aren’t heroes, they’re thugs and killers on the best of days. What were you *thinking*?”

“Jasper’s life was at stake!”

“And while I feel bad for the situation he was in, putting multiple employees at risk, two of them *eighteen* year olds, was not the way to handle the situation.”

“Sandra they aren’t exactly defenseless teenagers…” Whatever else Pebbles was going to say died under Sandra’s withering glare. He had a really good argument about how risks were inherent to the job, and how they had based their decision to go in on the best information they had available, but apparently that argument would never see the light of day.

“Now then, I’ve mostly got this situation handled here, but there are a few things I need to wrap up first. Luckily the heroes made a few mistakes with jurisdiction that should help speed this process up. As for you, since you like spending so much time in E12, you can help the newbies with our next job. The client was impressed with the footage of the last job and made a special request for the newbies to come. It’ll be this Saturday.”

Pebbles hesitated. He didn’t like the cold smile that Sandra suddenly had. “What kind of job?”

“Oh, just a simple bank robbery.”

"... a bank robbery? Who's stupid enough to rob a bank in Fortress City… No!"

"He's already paid in advance."

"Sandra, anyone but him!"

"Now now, he's one of our best customers and he pays for all the extras himself. Which reminds me, the hazard pay for this particular stunt is coming out of your paycheck."

"But, that... okay. That's fair. But Trebla the Terrible? Really!?"

"Yes really. Now, I'm going to go see if I can't get Tofu's knife collection returned, and you're going to stay here and listen to the rest of the good detective's questions. I want a full report when you get back to base."

And with that she left Pebbles to contemplate his life choices. He was really hoping that at least Buzzer wouldn't get pulled into the upcoming job, otherwise he'd never hear the end of it. Perhaps literally. And shit, if Sandra was this pissed, then he'd better avoid Hellion for the next few days. He shuddered at the thought of his boss actually angry.

"Well? Anything to say for yourself?" said the detective who had entered and picked up his questioning right where he left off.

"Yeah, never piss off the HR department."

Ch23 Home Cooking

Taste buds are pretty amazing. Consider the two donuts I'm holding. In my right hand, a donut with 'chocolate' glaze. In my left hand, a donut with 'maple' glaze. If I were to simply absorb the two donuts, their value as materials would be nearly identical. But, if I eat them with a human mouth, while using taste buds, and filter the resulting data through a human brain, suddenly eating either donut becomes an entirely different experience. The chocolate donut had a slightly bitter quality to it that was only enhanced by the sugar, and maple wound up being just sweet, but it was a *different* sweetness. Tangy maybe? More research had to be done, maybe humans had a better word for it. Finishing my donuts, I scanned the box for the next one I wanted to try.

"What's this one?" I asked the police minion.

"Coconut."

I grabbed it. The little pale flakes looked like sugar at first, but they actually turned out to be some kind of organic material without much flavor (the 'coconut', I presumed). I guess they were more for texture? Sometimes texture was important, although I think humans valued it more than I did.

"Isn't it really neat how they are all donuts, but they all taste different?"

He sighed. "I suppose I never really thought about it before."

Hmm, I believe the emotion the police minion is expressing is melancholy? Depression? I had been answering what questions I could, but admittedly the only thing I told him was useless personal

information, and not information about Hellion's Henchmen like he probably wanted. I almost felt bad, he had been rather polite and friendly given I was suspected of being a member of an opposing faction (not to mention giving me a box of donuts).

"Want a donut?" and I offered the box to him.

"...Sure."

For the next few minutes, I went about eating and cataloguing the donuts. When I was nearly done, the door to the room opened, revealing Sandra, and another police minion who gestured for the one who had been questioning me to follow. Sandra entered the room and the police left, closing the door behind them.

"Hello Sandra. What are you doing here?"

"Getting you boneheads out of trouble. Especially you. You do realize this is the second time in three days where you've decided to play hero? Maybe we should stick you in the sidekick program hmm?"

Ack, why did people keep recommending sidekick work to me?

"Please don't stick me in the sidekick program…"

She chuckled, "Tofu I'm kidding. But I am being serious about being a bit more careful. That trick you pulled with Magenta was fine, but fighting real villains like Sanguine is above your pay grade. Don't put yourself in that kind of danger if you can help it."

"Alright Sandra. I wasn't trying to get into danger, things just sort of turned out that way."

“As long as you’re trying. Now, how about you give me the full details?”

For the next few minutes I relayed my version of events, Sandra asking for clarification now and then. When I got to the part where I tunneled through the floor and killed the two guards, she frowned a bit, but when I asked about it she just said to continue. I was just getting to the part where the heroes showed up when there was a knock at the door, and the police minion who had been asking me questions walked in with what looked like a very large smartphone.

“Here’s what you requested," he said, somewhat grudgingly, and handed the device to Sandra. She thanked him and took it, before prompting him to leave. Before he did, he looked at me and said, “Remember what I said kid. Get out while you still can.” Then he turned to Sandra and said, “And if you care at all about your ‘client’ you’ll tell him the same thing.”

“Officer I’m not sure what you mean.”

“**Tch**, yeah right. If Hellion has to resort to pulling kids off the street for henchmen, then her days are numbered. I’d wash my hands of it if I were you. If you even can.” Then the officer left, slamming the door behind him.

Sandra quirked an eyebrow in my direction.

“What was that about?”

“Um, he said it was too dangerous being a minion, and that I should join the sidekick program?”

Sandra snorted, “Well, if that isn’t the pot calling the kettle black.”

I didn't know what that meant. I wish they hadn't taken my phone.

"Well, let's see what the damage looks like," she said, and opened the folder the officer had given her. She scanned the words displayed on the device she held, and the farther she read, the more she frowned.

"Tofu, why did you answer so many questions?"

"He said if I did I could have donuts."

"Tofu, didn't I just pay you a large cash advance? You could buy dozens of donuts."

"…"

"Did you spend it all already?"

"…not *all* of it."

Between Maggie's, the arcade, the new phone, rebuilding mass due to all the trouble I had returning Nicole's phone, and the amazing amount of street vendors, I had gone through the thousand dollars much faster than I had anticipated. I did make sure to keep enough for a few tofu burgers at Maggie's though.

"You aren't spending it on drugs or something are you?" asked Sandra. I noticed a slightly angry tone in her voice.

"No? I spent it mostly on food. I have a high metabolism."

She frowned at my answer before asking, "You really spent it all on food?"

"Yes, and a phone… and a few rounds of Gribblin's n' Ghouls at the arcade."

She rolled her eyes, “And I assume by high metabolism you just mean you need to eat enough to fuel your shapeshifting?”

“Yes.”

“Just making sure. I might need to give you a pamphlet on money management. Now, in the future I will warn you not to answer personal questions even with fake answers like these. You never know what they might glean from them,” and then she let out a small chuckle, “I can see why he thought you were homeless though. Putting ‘tunnels’ as your residence. If you’re going to lie you need to make it believable.”

I didn’t have anything to say about that.

And she noticed, her eyes narrowing. Ack. She was another perceptive human like Mikey.

“Tofu… are you homeless?”

“I have a place to stay…”

“Is it a tunnel?!”

“…yes.”

She placed a hand over her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“Tofu, why didn’t you bring this up during your job interview? We went over employee housing options didn’t we?”

“I didn’t think it was important.”

“How could you not… alright, when we get back you and me are going to discuss employee housing.”

“But I don’t really need-”

“No buts!”

After that Sandra gave me a lecture on dealing with the police, with a few mentions on how to use money more wisely thrown in. Apparently I should use a ‘grocery store’, and not just buy from vendors? I’d need my phone back to look up what a grocery was. When she finished she said, “I’ll be taking you and Ifrit back with me in a bit, the police can’t hold you as long as the others due to your age. I just need to speak with a few more people and then we can go. *Don’t* talk to any police.”

“Um, will I get my stuff back?’

“Yes, but they are confiscating the gun parts. That’s actually another thing we need to go over. You’re lucky they were just parts, and not an actual gun. The laws about carrying a gun are quite strict.”

“But Imp uses guns?”

“And he accepts the risks of being caught with them. We’ll go over this in detail later. For now I have to make sure everyone gets out without a strike on their record.”

Sandra left, and I was forced to wait for over an hour before anyone came to get me. I really wish they hadn’t taken my phone.

Eventually a police minion came to get me, and led me to where Sandra was. Ifrit was already with her. Surprisingly they did give my

stuff back, minus the gun parts, although Ifrit warned me not to turn my phone on until Socket had checked it over. Ifrit and I had to fill out some paperwork, which Sandra guided us through, and then we followed Sandra out of the building.

Just like that.

“This seems rather strange. They just let us leave?”

“Well, after some coaxing from yours truly,” replied Sandra, “They wouldn’t have been able to keep you anyways though, I just sped things along. The heroes messed up by picking you up over in E13, but then bringing you to E12. If you had committed a crime they would have been fine, but of course, you did no such thing.” At this she winked at the two of us.

Sandra led us to a shiny, black, four-door car. She clicked a small device she pulled from a pocket, and the car responded with a strange chirping noise before the doors all clicked. I followed Ifrit’s example and sat in one of the back seats; the front passenger seat was taken up with boxes of paper files. Once we were all buckled in Sandra started the car, and drove us out of the parking lot and in the direction of Ashwood St.

While Sandra drove she made small talk, mostly mumbling about district regulations. But she did mention Sanguine, and how it was a shame that he survived the culling of the Espada’s leaders. Apparently Sanguine was one of the leaders who might be able to repair the broken faction. I wasn’t pleased to learn that. I didn’t want them to reach a level where they could again drain resources from Hellion’s Henchmen. They were supposed to drain resources from *other* threatening factions, not mine.

“I’m sorry Sandra,” said Ifrit suddenly, in her raspy voice.

“Hmm? Why’s that hun?”

“...I couldn’t get Sanguine,” replied Ifrit.

Sandra snorted, “Hun, people have been trying to get Sanguine for a long time, he’s a survivor.”

“It’s not that, I…” she hesitated and glanced in my direction, then apparently made up her mind to keep speaking, “I had the shot. I just... couldn’t…”

“Ohhh, I see. Don’t feel bad about that. It’s not supposed to be easy.”

“*Tofu* did it fine with the guards.”

I wasn’t sure what Sandra was talking about. Sanguine obviously wasn’t a minor threat that could be released for later, and if Ifrit had killed him when she had the chance it would have made rescuing Jasper a lot easier. Maybe she needed more practice with proper threat assessment? Still, that was a rather critical error in judgement. How could she make such an obvious mistake?

“Yes, well, that’s not the only skill that counts,” said Sandra, “Tofu has things he’s good at, and you have things you’re good at. Like using common sense when being interrogated by police, isn’t that right Tofu? It’s a good thing I came to check and see how things were going.”

Ack. Touché I guess.

“So, is that why you came yourself? My mom didn’t ask you to bail me out?” asked Ifrit.

“Is that what you thought? No hun, I just needed to make sure things went smooth since the circumstances were iffy and most of you are new to this. She’s been keeping to her promise. I’m making sure of it,” at this Sandra winked at Ifrit.

For the rest of the drive Ifrit was much more talkative.

Sandra actually drove to a parking garage instead of one of the vehicle access tunnels. Then she took an elevator up to the third level of Ashwood St, while Ifrit and I took a secret elevator to the base. I had instructions to store my gear and meet Sandra in her office for the “housing arrangements.”

I’d never had gear to store before, so Ifrit showed me where the locker rooms were (divided into male and female areas), as well as telling me the procedure to request suit repairs. I was *very* glad that suit repairs were apparently commonplace. From what I had seen of what Socket did for Hellion’s Henchmen I doubted he had the time to individually repair every single suit, and I had been worried that getting it repaired would take a long time.

I removed my suit in one of the sectioned off changing cubicles, then I adjusted my disguise. Then I stored the suit in an empty locker, input my name onto the security pad, and pressed the button that would mark the locker for suit repairs. I was back to just my mask and my normal disguise of baggy clothes.

Leaving the locker room, I went in search of Socket to get my phone

checked out. He wasn't available, but another one of the minions that worked in the garage was able to help me check the phone, placing it in one of the multitude of devices that littered the garage to get 'scanned'. He didn't find anything, and I thanked him for helping before heading to Sandra's office. I was glad my phone wasn't compromised. I had a long list of words to search from my time at the police station. A 'grocery' turned out to be a vendor dedicated to food, so I was looking forward to that, but I might need more clarification on what Sandra meant by 'strike'. My searches for "strikes on records" were only turning up accounts of different types of training exercises, baseball and bowling featuring predominantly among the results.

I headed to the elevators up to Ashwood St. proper, and put away my mask before I exited into the fake clothing store. Viewing the bulky winter clothes, I considered a few of them for my disguise, but discarded the idea. They would fit over the minion suit, but they would stand out too much in the summer weather. Maybe Sandra could direct me to a store.

I headed to Sandra's office at 512, and entered to find Viper at her normal spot. She waved me into Sandra's open office. Inside Sandra was seated at her desk, and she was working on several stacks of paper arranged around her.

"There you are Tofu, please sit. I've also got some information about the next job I might as well go over with you."

She described the job and who it would be with. I didn't recognize the name, a "Trebla the Terrific," but a bank was a money storage facility if my searches were accurate. After we finished going over the job details we then began discussing a living space for myself. I didn't have any problem with the location, as I doubted I would actually

spend time there. But when the price was mentioned I balked.

“Do I really need a place? I’m fine with my tunnel.”

“Tofu, I won’t have an employee living on the street. Especially not an eighteen year old. Five hundred a month is a very reasonable price. You’ll just have to learn not to waste your money on snacks.”

“But five hundred is almost fifty tofu burgers!”

“It’s a lot more than just fifty burgers. If you make them yourself you’ll get a lot more out of it.”

“…I will?”

She rolled her eyes and muttered something about super villain parenting, “Yes! But you’ll need somewhere to cook and store ingredients. Honestly, I can’t believe I’m having this much trouble convincing someone to not be homeless.”

“I TOLD YOU TEENS ARE TROUBLE!” yelled Viper from the other room.

“Quiet you!” Sandra yelled back. Then she turned to me, “Anyways, if you’re that picky about money I have some other work you can do as well. It’s tedious non-powered work, but there’s no real risk involved.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“Alright, as for the apartment just try it out for a bit. If it’s really a problem we’ll work something out. Now, where did I put those pamphlets.”

She went through stacks of paper and handed me a few documents to look over and sign, as well as a few ‘pamphlets’ about ‘budgeting’. While I went through the papers she continued doing her work, and a few times other humans who I assumed to be minions stepped in to

ask her about ‘payroll’, or about specific jobs from clients. Even after I finished my paperwork she was still busy, and she asked me to wait while she made a phone call.

“Hey Cindy, this is Sandra, are you still at the base? Wonderful, I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I’m sitting here with Tofu, and he needs to be shown the employee housing, but I’m getting swamped in. Would you be alright with showing him around?... You’re sure? Thank you so much hun. I appreciate it,” she hung up and turned to me.

“Cindy will be here in a bit, she also lives in one of the employee apartments, so she can give you the tour. Here’s your key and the address,” and she handed a small flat rectangle to me with a number printed on it, as well as a piece of paper with the street address.

I waited in the front lobby with Viper. She ignored me as usual, but I noticed she was playing a game on her phone, one I didn’t recognize.

“What game is that?”

She glanced up at me before rolling her eyes and going back to her game.

“It’s Tetris Bash.”

“Oh… do you play Gribblin Tamer?”

“Yeah,” she didn’t look up from her game.

“I’ve gotten to level four.”

She snorted, “Level ninety eight. Get good scrub.”

I tried to get her to tell me how she did it, but she steadfastly refused. It was when I was trying to pester her into telling me what a purple Gribblin needed for level five, that another human approached and addressed me.

This one was young and female, with short, curly-brown hair, and wearing jeans, a pink shirt with stylized words on it, a black hoodie, and a pair of black hand coverings that looked like they were made of a thin, soft material. I wouldn’t have recognized her, but her raspy voice was an instant identifier.

“Hey. You’re Tofu right? Sandra wanted me to show you the apartments?”

“Hello Ifrit. Yes, she did.”

“Out of mask it’s Cindy. What do I call you?”

“Just Tofu is fine.”

“Kay. This way.”

She waved her hand in a “follow” motion and began walking to the door. I made to follow her, but Lily’s (she wasn’t wearing her mask either) clawed hand was suddenly reaching over the desk and grabbing my shoulder, preventing me from walking away. She leaned in and began to whisper.

“Hey, you’ve been fitting in pretty well, and Sandra vouches for you. But just in case: cause Cindy any grief, and I’ll be first in line to gut

you," Then she patted my shoulder and gave me a small shove in Cindy's direction.

I wonder what that was about?

Cindy led me a few blocks away and out over some of the third level bridges between buildings. Over the horizon the sun was setting (the police station had taken a lot of time), and the tall buildings and bridges created an interesting pattern of shadows.

We walked in silence, and it was about halfway to our destination that I realized what was off about Cindy. She was a mutant. It wasn't readily apparent, at first glance she appeared completely normal, but there were small things that gave it away. One of which was a second set of translucent eyelids that closed shut horizontally when she blinked, and another was when the wind shifted, and I detected trace amounts of a chemical that would act as a flame-retardant mixed into her sweat. I had assumed that her ability to throw fireballs was a power, but apparently it was a product of mutavus. That must be why Viper warned me off, others must have targeted Cindy for her rare and valuable mutation.

Bleh. Viper needn't have threatened me. I would love to know how Cindy's biology worked, but I wasn't suicidal. I had heard enough to piece together that Cindy was Hellion's offspring, and I knew how protective humans could be of each other. If a vigilante took offense at killing random muggers, then Hellion would probably make me a 'barbecue' if I so much as injured Cindy. I was almost insulted that Viper would think me so stupid.

We arrived at a tall apartment building. Several bridges extended to its third level, and the ground level wasn't visible past the sections of the second level around the building. On the second level I noted a marked off rectangular area next to the building, where several humans were involved in a training exercise involving a ball and two metallic hoops. A lot of them had black masks on.

"Is that baseball?" I asked and pointed.

She arched an eyebrow at me, "That's basketball dude."

"Oh, are strikes good or bad in that one?"

She chuckled, "You can ask to join in if you want to learn. Most of the people in this building work for Hellion, or they don't mind if you do."

"Okay."

She lead me to the third level entrance, and showed me how to use the 'key card' on the door lock. Inside it seemed like a standard apartment building layout, and she led me to my room on the second floor.

We passed quite a few people on the way, and Cindy greeted them all by name, introducing them to me briefly. I was impressed when she even got the names right of two young, brown-scaled mutants, who as far as I could tell were identical down to their 'DNA'. Maybe she had practice telling them apart, she seemed quite friendly with them.

We reached the apartment that matched the number on my keycard, and this time I opened it with the keycard myself to make sure I had it right. Then Cindy turned to me.

“It’s kinda small, but it has a kitchen corner and its own toilet. There’s a grocery down the block on the second level, and if you head for the ground level you’ll want to wear your mask so people don’t bother you. Oh, and don’t rob any of the stores near here please. They pay their dues to Hellion.”

“Okay. Thank you for showing me the way Cindy.”

“No problem, and welcome to the team,” then she reached a gloved hand out in a customary human greeting. I shook it, and she nodded before heading off (I guess handshakes work for goodbyes too?).

I entered the apartment to explore. Inside it was pretty much what she had said. Two small rooms, one with a sectioned off corner and several appliances I assumed made it the kitchen, and a second room with a tiny attached toilet room. Surprisingly the second room contained a small ‘bed’, the only furniture I had seen in the otherwise empty apartment. I guess humans considered a rectangular sleeping area to be critical enough that it was provided. It explains why Sandra pushed so hard for me to have a ‘home’ even if it was a waste of money. Sigh, at least there was a window in both rooms, which meant I had multiple exits in an emergency. This grocery idea better be worth it.

I left the apartment in search of the grocery. I found it. And yes. It was very much worth it. So, *so* worth it. Sandra was right and I was wrong. And I knew what I had to do.

Sanguine was pissed. For the past two hours he had paced the small warehouse office he had commandeered, shuffling slowly back and

forth with the use of his cane. Several minions had come in and out to receive orders or tasks, but mostly they just received an insult and were told to get out. Or if they really pressed their luck they would receive an injury and a small bloodletting. Normally Sanguine was a bit more composed, but the disastrous events of the past few days had sapped the last of his patience.

The Espada were done. The writing was on the wall. Sanguine had been through failures like this before, and recognized the signs. It was only unfortunate that this one was coming so late in his life. He was still healthy, his power ensured it, but he was ninety five now. The health benefits of controlling his own blood had propped him up well, but age still came to him. He had what, another decade? Two if he pushed it? In anger he swiped his cane across the only desk in the room, throwing a lonely ceramic coffee mug onto the floor, where it shattered. The minion brave enough to poke his head in at the noise received the task of cleaning the pieces.

A decade. Two maybe. It would have to be enough. Sanguine had long ago given up the idea of enjoying the fruits of his labor. No, with his last few years revenge on that Hellion bitch would have to be enough. Her and everyone else who had stood in his way over the years. The Espada had merely been the latest in a long line of tools aimed at his enemies. The limitations of Sanguine's power and age meant he had often been the behind the scenes driving force of whatever organization he attached to. He had rebuilt before, he could do it again.

He might need to try a new sector though. E12's supply of purist idiots had dwindled, and the ones left were either fed up with the Espada, or smart enough to keep their heads down. Maybe he should head to NE12? Try to galvanize the suburbanites into fearing the other sectors' poor population moving into their relatively quiet suburbs? Poor vs slightly poorer never took too long to set up…

On the other hand, enough of the lower rank and file had survived to maybe get the ball rolling on another anti-mutie movement. No point in throwing away a resource this late in the game if he could help it. He just needed a good location. Maybe go all the way to E10? Close enough they knew about the Espada's "trials" vs the mutants, but far enough they hadn't been too negatively affected by the Espada's methods? He would need a new name for the group though, or the capes would be on it too quickly. Another vaguely crusade-ish sounding word maybe. In Spanish of course, this was still California, it needed to seem sympathetic to the local roots.

He sat down in a plush office chair to think, placing his cane to the side and picking up a small remote. There was an old flat screen t.v. mounted on the wall which he turned on to the news, more for the ambient noise than anything else, and thought over plans on how to recover from this latest disaster. Eventually he began to doze, the hour was late.

A noise woke him up. A soft thump. Had he knocked his cane over? Dropped the remote? No and no. And it was much later now, the minions wouldn't be bothering him. They weren't *that* stupid.

Something was wrong. He bit his cheek, the blood flowing into his mouth incredibly fast given the insignificant wound. Sanguine got up faster than one would expect from someone his age, and immediately he noticed the air vent grate lying on the floor.

He looked up.

And flinched back as the large humanoid figure landed nearly on top of him, knocking him to the floor. It was on him in a second, grappling him while taking care to not use so much force that it punctured his skin, trying to cover his mouth and nose to strangle him. *Shit.* Whoever it was knew about his power. Too bad for them he was too experienced to be caught by such a gambit.

He spat, the pooled blood in his mouth shooting forward like a shotgun blast. Droplets and ribbons of blood cut into the shadowed face of his attacker, and then he *pulled* expecting the torrent of blood that would leave his attacker a husk.

Nothing came of it. Oh, liquid flowed, but it wasn't blood, and Sanguine's power couldn't find purchase on it. Even the blood he had spat didn't return in full. Whatever liquid fueled the attacker had diluted or destroyed most of it.

Suddenly both combatants changed tactics. Sanguine spat more blood at his opponent's head, the attacker inserted claws into Sanguine's eye sockets, and for a brief moment they raced for who could destroy the other's brain faster.

Sanguine lost. Unsurprising given the attacker's brain was no longer located in its head.

The attacker tore into the body of Sanguine and absorbed the remains, making sure that there would be no regeneration, no last second powered recovery. There was soon no trace that Sanguine had ever been in the office at all, and the assassin would have left with none being the wiser. But an Espada minion unfortunately poked her head in.

“Hey boss, you up? Frank made it ba- HOLY SHIT!”

The assassin rushed the minion, but she was fast enough to slam the door and go running down the hall yelling a warning. The attacker slumped. So much for stealth. Maybe it could still get out through the air vent? But it wouldn’t be good to get caught in a narrow vent though...

The decision was made for it when multiple minions burst through the door. The leader of the pack Frankie himself.

“Who the fuck are you!? Where’s Sanguine!?” yelled Frankie.

The attacker’s face was warped from all the shifting and healing that had occured. Nevertheless, the tilt of its head and what features remained clearly indicated its surprise. Then it spoke in a surprisingly clear voice.

“Frankie? Why are you here? Sanguine threw you away, I thought you’d at least be smart enough to cause trouble somewhere else. That’s strike three.”

Frankie’s face colored in anger and confusion, “Wha- who the hell you think you are? Answer the damn question!”

“The subway, my suit, and now you’re in my way. That’s three

strikes.”

“What? The hell you talking about?”

“Three strikes Frankie. You’re out.”

Ch24 Good to the Last Bite

It's too bad that the Espada were so anti-mutant. If they had some combat models they might have actually stood a chance. The unmodified human body is pretty amazing in some respects, but not so much in a fight with sharp weapons. Poke one too many holes and they can't even stop themselves from bleeding out. Take Frankie for instance: three knives to the gut and a severed hamstring, and now he was bleeding out in the middle of the room, while the crowd of Espada minions tried to figure out how to get past me. They had knives, pipes, and some of the braver ones tried to use their fists, but I don't think their combat training was very good. Terrible footwork, they barely watched their placement, and unlike rats they had no sense of teamwork or using numbers to their advantage. One of them had had a gun, but she had been too hesitant to shoot while I was entangled with her allies. A mistake that allowed me to steal the gun from her without her firing any meaningful shots.

If I were to judge it though, their worst mistake was probably letting me get between them and the only door.

I ripped the throat out of one of the last minions in front of me, and then there were only four. Frankie, a minion that had fainted when I threw one minion's head into the crowd, and a female who was trying to help a male push his guts back in. Now all that was left was clean-up. I just hoped that I could get it done quickly, before anyone else showed up. There were probably more Espada as perimeter guards or whatever, but I just wanted to get rid of the ones who had seen me.

I stabbed the unconscious minion and any other corpses that looked relatively undamaged. For Frankie I didn't bother getting close, I just

threw knives at him until his power deactivated and he stopped moving, and then a few more for good measure. Then I approached the wounded male. Surprisingly he was doing rather well considering the extent of his wounds, he was almost sitting upright, and was talking with the female.

"You have to! I can feel it already! I'm so hungry…"

"NO! That's impossible! Your reaction is so strong, it can't be mutavus! We can figure something out or, or…" her words trailed off, and she recoiled from me as I reached them.

Mutavus? I examined the male's gut wound for a moment and was pleasantly surprised. The tissues were knitting themselves back together slowly, and his guts were being pulled back into place from the inside. It wasn't as impressive or quick as the yellow fur had been, but it was far above what a normal human could do. Plus, there were small indicators of other changes beginning to take place. Bone growth, and new tissue formations that were beginning to close the gaping wound in his abdomen. It wasn't just regeneration, it was also modification.

This must be a mutation in action! I hadn't gotten to see one so far, and I was eager to get good samples of the virus itself. It had been surprisingly elusive considering how infectious it was supposed to be.

I reached for the mutating male, when the female suddenly shrieked, "DON"T TOUCH HIM YOU *FREAK*! THIS IS ALL *YOUR FAULT*. You ***MONSTER***!"

I ignored the screaming female and reached for the male, when suddenly the female tackled me! I was surprised she would attempt

such an ineffective maneuver, and shoved her away immediately.

I noticed the burning a second later.

> Damage to epidermis detected.
>
> Estimated threat: High.

Where she had touched me my flesh was burned, some kind of acid. I quickly ejected the affected areas, and retreated from the unexpected threat; if the vector was touch based I needed to create distance. Had she been hiding a weapon? Doubtful. She wouldn't have waited until all her allies were dead to pull out an effective weapon.

As I watched, a clear liquid started to drip from her rapidly, and pool around her. Everything it touched sizzled and dissolved; furniture, the thin carpet, her own clothes, and the dead bodies around her. She herself ignored the substance, and got to her feet while still yelling obscenities. Apparently she was immune to the substance herself. Then she looked at me and swung an arm.

I dodged the resulting shower of droplets and retreated to the door, the droplets burning sizzling holes into the carpet where I had been standing. Hmm, was this a mutation or a power? Biologically she appeared unchanged, but the amount of liquid coming off of her was physically more than her body could hold… unless she was converting it out of the air somehow?

She swept an arm in my direction again, and this time a thick spray of the clear acid came off her arm, rushing towards me. I dodged

again, but noticed she was already gathering more acid to throw, this time in an unnaturally writhing mass around her hand. Definitely a power, she must have triggered *just now*. She was using it effectively regardless, and her control was growing by the second. This was rapidly becoming too dangerous to continue observations.

I pulled out the handgun I stole earlier in the fight, and shot her multiple times in the head and torso, until I was out of bullets.

She fell forward and slammed into the floor, unmoving, and hopefully dead. Then, surprisingly, her body began to change colors rapidly, right before it lost cohesion and dissolved, becoming the very acid it had been producing. The additional volume of acid created a tiny wave that swept outwards, encompassing the rest of the room (while I retreated outside the door), and all the objects in it.

Including the mutating male.

He screamed briefly, but the aggressively corrosive substance outpaced his regeneration easily, and devoured him completely, along with all the other nearby bodies and furniture.

After the male died, the room was suddenly quite silent. The only sound was the sizzle of acid as it slowly settled over the floor of the room. I dipped a finger into the substance, to try and analyze it, but it was so corrosive that it just destroyed the micro units, and I couldn't get a reading on the composition. Disappointment.

I scanned the room a final time, noting how the acid ate anything

that wasn't stone or metal (and those still looked somewhat corroded). At the current volume it would probably dissolve most everything before it finally neutralized or evaporated.

Sigh. At least clean-up had been easy.

I sat in the back of the taxi and pondered the last few hours. Luckily, the acid-producing female had stayed dead. The manner in which her body disintegrated had been very odd, but my internet searches for an explanation hadn't really turned up anything. Closest thing I could find was a reference to bad triggers, but I doubted that applied in this case. Her power had been working fine up until she died. I attributed the strange disintegration to just an oddity of her power.

One thing this brought to the forefront was that I really needed to figure out a viable ranged weapon. Sandra argued against using a gun due to the legal risks, but I was a bit more concerned with the *physical* risks of not having a ranged option. Luckily the one I stole was in much better condition than the first one I acquired. I didn't have any more bullets, but dismantling the gun gave me a much clearer picture of the subtle details that went into it. Like the barrel rifling to make projectiles spin. I wouldn't have thought of that myself. Now I just needed a design that worked with bone and muscle. If mechanical guns were no good, then a biological gun would have to do. Surely there would be no arguments if it was produced by my "power."

I might have to clear it with Sandra anyways though. I was having

trouble keeping details from her, and I didn't think I could win an argument with her. Not that it seemed like arguing with her was a productive idea anyways, she had been right about a lot of things so far. Like when she told Ifrit: "Tofu has things he's good at, and you have things you're good at." Ifrit was better at blowing things up and causing property damage, and I was good at killing. Since we were a 'team', it only made sense that I get rid of the threats that Ifrit couldn't.

Though I was a bit worried that Sandra would find out I killed Sanguine, and after she told me not to go near him. Hopefully if she did find out my success in the endeavor would placate her.

Tracking Sanguine down had been easy enough (he left a bloody scent trail so obvious it might as well have had signs pointing to him), and happily my countermeasures for Sanguine had worked perfectly. Control over blood was quite powerful when your opponents *had* blood, but I had temporarily replaced mine with a saline solution and micro unit mixture, to replace the functions blood would normally perform. I found it strange that his power required a specific mixture of cells and plasma, but as I was quickly coming to realize, powers rarely seemed to have completely logical rules.

Power thus neutralized, he hadn't put up much of a fight. Even with his blood power reinforcing his frail body, it hadn't held up to my assault. I wonder what was wrong with him? Many of his organs showed signs of fatigue, and cell production had been substandard. Eating him hadn't revealed a direct cause…

…or anything of importance at all for that matter. No physical mechanism to move the blood, no brain anomalies, nothing about the composition of his blood was unusual in any way. I had done a thorough analysis, but there was nothing to copy or steal.

Disappointment.

But at the very least it confirmed my theory. Powers were non-replicable. I had been able to consume some of the yellow-fur, and all of the vigilante and Sanguine, and a few bits of Frankie. Nothing learned.

True, the 'lunch special' back at the RedFin had given me usable designs, but I suspected this was merely a result of its exotic base anatomy, and not a facet of its power activation. No, if I was going to copy more useful codes and designs, then I would need to target mutants and animals.

I needed to learn more about mutavus.

As for how to go about that… hunting down mutants was probably a bad idea. Far too many risks with that option, and Hellion's Henchmen seemed to be very mutant friendly besides. I wouldn't want to become at odds with my own faction.

Poking holes into normal humans would probably fare even worse. All the same risks, plus the added chance of causing a hazardous trigger (as this incident with the acid woman proved). If I decided to try forcing mutations, I would definitely need to wait until after Odd Summer had ended.

So for now, electronic research would have to do.

I used my phone to pull up the ‘wiki’ page for mutavus. While I had read it top to bottom already, I was hoping some of the ‘links’ could bring me to a more detailed description of mutavus’s physical characteristics. The wiki mostly had historical information, and information on prevention and treatment, neither of which I was all that interested in.

Why would one want to prevent a mutation anyways? As far as I had seen, mutations were largely beneficial. True, powers seemed to be much more effective, but despite Odd Summer they were still rare. I considered a mutation an excellent alternative. Just another oddity of humans I guess.

“Hey kid? Sorry, but I won’t drive any farther than this.”

I was pulled from my musings by the taxi driver. He was a short man with a large mustache, wearing a bullet resistant vest and blast helmet similar to those used by Hellion’s Henchmen (except his were in yellow, like his taxi), and he seemed *very* anxious. He flinched at every sudden movement, held the steering wheel in a vice grip with both hands, and his eyes scanned the areas beyond the windows while he chewed on an unlit ‘cigarette’. Whenever a pedestrian came into view his right hand would flinch towards a ‘shotgun’ he had mounted in his passenger seat. Apparently taxi drivers were allowed to carry guns.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“Up ahead is Hellion territory dead center, I ain’t driving into that this late. You sure this is where you need?”

“Yes, I live a few blocks from here.”

“Christ…”

“It’s fine, I can make my own way from here.”

“Your funeral kid.”

The taxi cab had a reinforced barrier between the front seat and the back seats, with a payment device mounted on it. I inserted my chit and paid the man, then exited the vehicle. The taxi sped away the moment the door was closed. I understood his reluctance to enter a verified villain’s territory right now. Originally I had planned to take the bus, but it had zoomed past the bus stop while on fire (but without any passengers...or a driver). On the way back to Ashwood St. I had also spotted other incidents, such as a small rat swarm being contained by police, and a building which had somehow been turned upside-down while staying perfectly connected to the surrounding bridges (that had hurt to look at). It seemed Odd Summer was in full effect.

I started in the direction of the apartment building, and as I walked, quickly noted several humans and mutants who were loitering about, glaring or sneering in my direction. Their attitudes changed entirely when I pulled out my mask and put it on. Groups of loiterers practically melted out of my path, and instead of threatening glances they avoided eye contact, or gave brief nods which were a human sign of recognition, and I was told, respect.

From what had been explained to me, these weren’t official members of Hellion’s Henchmen, but instead were local non-powered gangs, cowl ‘groupies’, or even civilians who held allegiance to Hellion, or simply held hostility for Hellion’s enemies. Wearing a Hellion’s Henchmen mask in this area was basically a free pass.

And if Pebbles was to be believed, my willingness to don my minion

mask in public, and in full view of people, was worth ‘street cred’. Hopefully cred was like chits. My funds were low, and the taxi had been expensive.

I made it back to the apartment building without further incident, and I used a side entrance (with a lockable entryway room for taking off masks) to enter the building itself. Then up a few stairs, and swipe my keycard on the door lock, and I was in my apartment.

“My apartment.”

Huh.

Felt kinda nice actually. Guess there really was something to this after all. The tunnel had been mine, but only in the sense that I used it to sleep, and no other humans had used it to travel while I was squatting there.

I entered the ‘bedroom’ and sat on the bed, scanning through the websites I had pulled up on my phone. I was having a frustratingly hard time finding anything at all on the physical properties of the mutavus virus. Almost all hard data was concentrated on recorded mutation rates, or symptoms and treatment, or on the history of its spread. But there was only speculation and theory on the actual vector of infection, or the physical makeup of the virus itself. Apparently the only way to know if you were infected was to actually suffer a mortal wound and start mutating. Otherwise the virus was completely dormant, and invisible to attempts to locate it. Once the mutation began to occur samples could be collected from the affected individual, but there were problems with that as well. After the metamorphic process was complete, the virus went back to a state of dormancy, and what samples scientists and doctors collected during

were fragile, and broke down quickly. Plus, there seemed to be a wide range of differences between samples based upon the types of physical alterations occurring.

The most interesting article I read detailed samples taken from a rare mutation that had granted extensive regenerative properties to the recipient, but had left their outer characteristics largely unchanged. It was thought by scientists, that if they could cultivate that strand of mutavus, and purposely expose people to it, they could give people a beneficial mutation that didn't alter appearance, and therefore made them immune to less desirable mutations. The samples were injected into several volunteers...

...most of whom died from 'cancer' several months later. Two got away with nothing at all happening. And one volunteer mutated so badly they were forced to euthanize him, his mutation forcing him to attack and eat other humans, or suffer ever more mutation. Obviously the virus was more complicated than the humans understood.

I wonder if that's why my micro units self destruct without a core signal. Without me directing them I could definitely see them causing problems.

I was a bit disappointed with how little information the humans had. It was somewhat understandable though. Mutavus had first started showing up about sixty years ago or so according to these reports, but only became a worldwide "problem" in the last two decades. Considering even I hadn't been able to detect dormant mutavus, it was unfair to expect more from the humans in such a short timeframe (they had to focus on real problems like Odd Summer after all). I'd just have to do the research myself, or maybe Jasper would know more on the topic. But that could wait for tomorrow.

I settled in to sleep. It felt good to have accomplished so much in a single twenty-four hour period. A bullet defense acquired, information source secured, the biggest threat to my position in a strong faction eliminated, and a location where I could practice ‘cooking’. Yep, today had been a good day.

I rested my head on the pillow and covered myself with the blanket. Time to give this bed thing a try.

…

…

...

It was too soft… and my weight made me sink too deep into the mattress…and if I had to react fast, the mattress and sheets provided poor traction. This wouldn’t do. I got out of the bed and looked it over again, before deciding to crawl under it.

…

Ahhh. Much better.

I woke early the next morning, and headed over to the elevator hidden in the apartment building. This one required both a keycard and mask to access. Upon arrival at the base I headed straight to the large main chamber.

To get breakfast.

While Sandra had been lecturing me about groceries and proper nutrition, she had also let this little nugget of information slip past: the Hellion's Henchmen cafeteria served a complimentary breakfast if you came early.

I wonder why no one told me about it?

I grabbed a few muffins and a pot of coffee, and sat down at a table to eat. A few minions wandered by with their own breakfasts and said good morning, but when I noticed Mikey coming from the elevator hallway, I waved for him to join me. I hadn't seen him since Monday, and I had a lot of stuff to talk to him about. He wandered over when he noticed me waving.

Yawn "Mornin' Tofu. Got enough muffins there?"

"No, but I was told you aren't supposed to 'hog' them. Here, have one."

I graciously handed over a chocolate chip muffin. But *not* a lemon poppyseed one. Those ones were mine.

We talked about stuff that had happened over the past two days. I let Mikey know, in no uncertain terms, that missing the company dinner had been a mistake (missing good free food was simply irresponsible), and then I gave him a retelling of my activities yesterday (minus my removal of Sanguine). Mikey had apparently been working with other black mask minions yesterday, setting up network devices for Socket, and we discovered that we were both scheduled to go out and set up more network devices. Unfortunately, when I mentioned trying to get to level five in Gribblin Tamer, Mikey revealed that he didn't play that game, and didn't know the secret to advance. Darn. We finished up breakfast shortly after, and I returned the empty pot of coffee.

"Tofu, where are you going? Garage is this way," said Mikey.

"Morning training with Adder. I didn't get to yesterday."

"The job starts in like an hour."

"Which gives us an hour to train. Are you not coming?"

"Ehhhh…"

"Come on Mikey. You can't miss both food *and* training. They're important!"

Seriously now. And Sandra complained that *I* did dangerous things.

I cajoled Mikey to the gym, and for the rest of the hour we trained with Adder and other minions until it was time for the job to start. It was a good thing too, Mikey's combat training was definitely lacking.

Just what exactly were those humans schools doing?

Once done with training, we met up with Rattleback in the garage for instructions. Apparently my main job would simply be to stay in the van, and act as a reserve in case of a situation that required a power user. The non-powered minions would handle setting up the devices that Socket needed for his network.

And then Mikey, Brilla and Fred from team three, Tedic (one of the newbies who hadn't quit), and I, all piled into the van with a stack of Socket's devices.

And then the strangest thing happened.

We had a completely relaxing, and uneventful day.

We traveled around the northern section of E13, where most of the building alterations were. Every now and then we stopped, and the minions would take one of the devices and install it somewhere innocuous. Other than that, we met one of the local gangs, dodged a few police, and we got to talk with the superhero Brick, which was neat.

But there wasn't any fighting, and nothing tried to kill me. It was weird. But nice.

Bing, Bong

The sliding glass doors opened, and I entered the grocery.

I loved the air in here. It was cool and crisp, and smelled of many different foods. Everywhere were shelves of food, in boxes, bags, and metal cans. Everything was labeled with its own symbols, and the prices were clearly displayed. There were even bags of raw sugar if you wanted to buy them. Food, language, numbers, and little carts that you could use to transport stuff. It was like humans had decided to take all the good things they had created, and put them all in the same place. The only way it could be better would be if they threw in a few arcade training simulators.

I grabbed one of the carts and headed towards the aisles. My main paycheck for the job on Sunday had come in (a happy surprise after today's work), so I had plenty of money, but I planned to take Sandra's advice and target only the specific food items I would need. Buns, tofu patties, 'ketchup', sugar, cheese substitute, I picked these and other items, and placed them into my cart, slowly making my way down a list of 'ingredients' that I would need to make a 'recipe' I had downloaded. I was planning to try my hand at making tofu burgers. It undoubtedly would not be the same quality as Maggie's, but I needed practice, and if I was going to start somewhere, tofu burgers were my prefered option.

I finished gathering my ingredients and headed for the checkout counter. I was third in line behind two other humans, the one in front of me in a large coat. A good thing too, I had scouted the grocery yesterday, but I hadn't yet used the weird moving counter where you

placed the food, so I could use being third to make sure I did this correctly. Take a rubber divider, place it down, start placing food-

"Put the money in the bag and no one gets hurt."

Estimated threat: low.

I was stunned. After the first customer had walked away with their items, the second human in line had pulled out a handgun and pointed it at the cashier. I couldn't believe how stupid this human was, didn't he know where we were? We were in the heart of Hellion's territory, even the cashier looked dumbfounded at the audacity.

Sigh. Should I… call the police? Probably not right? Ifrit said the stores near the apartments paid Hellion. Did that mean I had to step in? But technically I was a "civilian" right now. I didn't want to make the wrong choice and make trouble for Sandra again...

While I pondered whether or not I needed to use a mask, the cashier went about opening the register, and then, **beep**, pressed a button. The floor underneath the robber opened up, and he fell into a black pit, of which I couldn't see the bottom.

"You like dat you sumbitch!? You like dat!? Come in *my* store and think you rob *me*!? Where da hell you think we are!?"

The cashier yelled taunts and curses down the hole at the would be robber, until the opening closed back up. I couldn't even see a seam where the robber had fallen through.

"Sorry bout dat. Happen sometime. Here, have some gum for trouble," then he added a small pink packet to my items before ringing up the rest of them. I paid him, and thanked him for the 'gum'. Then I made my way out of the store (being careful to avoid the spot on the floor that had opened up), and rushed back to my apartment. I was simply not in the mood for more surprises. I had cooking to do.

But it was only after I got back to the apartment, and assembled my ingredients, that I realized I had forgotten something rather important.

Dang it.

Side Dish #3

Pseudomonia benedicci, also known as **Benedicci**, is a symbiotic bacteria found in humans and several other animal species. Believed to be a highly advanced evolution, or mutation of, probiotic bacteria, Benedicci is most famous for its beneficial relationship with its host. Unlike other diseases, Benedicci regulates itself to not cause harm to its host, and increases the effectiveness of several bodily functions, primarily the immune system. The effectiveness of this improvement varies between individuals, and is commonly referred to as a **Benedicci reaction**.

The bacteria is transmitted in conditions similar to the common cold, i.e. airborne droplets (aerosols), direct contact with infected nasal secretions, or fomites (contaminated objects). Upon successfully transmitting to a new host, the bacteria begins to intentionally attract the immune system. At this point the host may develop cold-like symptoms that dissipate over the next twenty-four hours as the host and bacteria acclimate to each other. This process is nearly always guaranteed; however, in rare cases, the host's immune system may never accept the bacteria and instead may attempt to eliminate it as a normal infection. Reapplication of a different strand of Benedicci can sometimes overcome this issue. The rate of transmission and acclimation of Benedicci increases during Odd Summer, giving credence to the theory that it is a **Powered Disease**.

Once accepted by the host's immune system, the bacteria incubates and gathers at key organs within the host: the brain (primarily amygdala) , heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. When an injury or infection

by other diseases occurs, the Benedicci clusters will release Benedicci cells into the bloodstream, which will coordinate with white blood cells to eliminate harmful diseases.

In addition to supplementing the immune system, Benedicci can also help several other bodily functions, such as clearing out toxins or harmful drugs, and slowing blood flow to open wounds. As a result, hosts of Benedicci rarely succumb to shock.

In about ten percent of cases Benedicci will synergize with its host more than normal, providing enhancements in other bodily systems. This is commonly known as a good reaction, or high reaction. The opposite (such as when the body rejects Benedicci) is known as a bad reaction, and happens in less than one percent of cases. Good reactions can sometimes be so strong that they mimic powers. Examples include increased reaction speed, and wounds that close so quickly you can view the healing process with the naked eye. However, these extremes are very rare.

Benedicci was first found in a town called Last Stop near the Alaskan Barrier Wall. It came to the attention of Heroes who were tracking down spreading outbreaks of Mutavus, believed to have originated from a breach in the wall during Odd Summer a year prior. While most communities nearest the wall had fully succumbed to Mutavus, many citizens in the town of Last Stop had proven resistant to mutation, appearing fully human. An analysis of the unafflicted individuals showed that they hosted a previously unknown bacteria (named later as Benedicci). It was then decided by heroes at the scene to spread Benedicci to communities around Mutavus outbreaks to try and contain its spread. While containment measures ultimately failed, Benedicci is still a recognized preventative measure

> for Mutavus, and its use is credited with preventing millions of mutations across the globe.
>
> Next time you turn in an essay late, at least refrain from parroting the wiki to me. See me after class. - Mr. K

Mikey woke up at 6:30 am, and for a second the thought that he was late for school had him struggling to escape his tangled blankets. Then he remembered that school was over, had been over since Friday, and he collapsed back into the mattress. He wouldn't even need to be at work until ten, evil minion hours were surprisingly reasonable.

Mikey froze. That thought was like a cold splash of water, ruining any chance of going back to sleep. He was a *minion*. An honest-to-god, load the money, lower the hero into a vat full of lava ***minion***. How had he ever thought this was a good idea? The explosion, the hostages, *Turbo* showing up to stop them, it was insane! True he had signed up for it and attended the orientation, but it hadn't felt *real* until the job on Sunday. *That* had been what really hammered it home for Mikey.

Not for the first time, he wondered if that was kind of the point.

Deciding he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, he kicked off the tangled knot of covers and went about dressing himself. Dark jeans and a shirt with no identifiable marks was all it took to be ready for the day. Hellion's Henchmen didn't really have a uniform per se, but he had been advised that clothing with no real markings and that avoided bright colors was the recommended.

That and the mask. Mikey's eyes drifted to the little black "wristband" sitting on his desk. It unfolded into a standard domino mask easily as long as you knew how to twist it correctly. Ha, "standard." Somehow it contained a simple communications system, an onboard map of E13, and lens to protect the eyes, all inside a tiny cloth band that matched the current fashion trends. The unassuming piece of tech was probably the most expensive thing Mikey owned, and the lady who had given it to him had grabbed it out of a box containing dozens more.

He grabbed the wristband and put it on before he forgot it. Then he wandered into the kitchen, and turned on the small t.v. to the news while he put together some cereal using the last of the powdered milk.

It seemed Odd Summer was definitely gearing up. The news casters didn't even bother trying to list everything going on, simply talking about politics, or covering the new hero announcements, while a list of the worst affected sectors scrolled in the background. Not too bad actually. The east and west sectors usually got the worst of it, but today only S8, S9, and SW8 were under alert, with only NW5 under a lockdown warning. All of it well away from E13.

It wouldn't last forever though. The casual bets of E13's residents were never on whether or not E13 would see some shit. They bet on when it *did* happen, would it be bad enough to cause a lockdown, or if it would be caused by some bad trigger, or a monster, or maybe a fight with the local villains.

Like Hellion.

Mikey grimaced at the errant thought. It wasn't a big deal. Like the

lady had said, he could make the money he needed, then quit. A few days of grunt work, and then he could pay for college, get a degree or certification or something, get a legit job, and never mention this summer again. All he had to do for now was keep his head down.

No big deal.

Having lost his appetite for the cold cereal, he dumped the rest of the bowl in the sink, and headed out the door. He still had plenty of time before today's job started (just placing devices for Hellion's tinker again, thank god), but with nothing better to do, he headed in the direction of the local gym which hid the secret elevator.

That had been another surprise to Mikey. Secret entrances! Underground bases! Sure people knew there might be a lair here or there, but Hellion's tunnels were *extensive*. For most of his life Hellion's Henchmen had been that local gang in the background. You saw the graffiti tags, or the odd person in a minion mask near the more disreputable areas, but the realization that Hellion's Henchmen was such a large player in the cowl community shocked Mikey. The past few days felt like he had sneaked a peek behind a theater curtain, only to discover Atlantis behind it. A super secret evil villain organization practically under his house! Tim would have gone nuts to learn about it all.

Mikey grimaced at the thought. Tim could *never* learn about this. He was the brother Mikey never had, but he was also as straight a shooter as they came, and a hero fanatic to boot. Mikey could only imagine Tim's disappointment if he found out...

Mikey shook the thought away as he entered the secret passage into the elevator and donned the minion mask. Tim wouldn't find out.

Mikey would earn enough money for college, quit, and then he'd be able to stop lying to his best friend.

The elevator ride was smooth as normal, entirely at odds with Mikey's tumultuous inner thoughts. Finally it stopped, and Mikey exited into the corridor that housed the multitude of elevators. It always felt like he was sneaking in for some reason, a bit magnified this time as he realized he really did have a lot of time before today's job actually started. Perhaps he should have tried harder to get back to sleep.

He exited the elevator corridor into the large main chamber, and wandered in the direction of the garage, when he noticed a minion in a white mask waving at him. He tensed for a second, but relaxed immediately when he realized it was Tofu, and then chuckled as he walked over. Tofu was sitting at one of the tables with a small pile of muffins in front of him and his cellphone out, somehow utterly relaxed despite being surrounded by other minions eating breakfast, quite a few of them wearing the bone-white masks that marked them as being powered. He'd only known him a week or so, but Tofu just had this way of derailing serious situations that made him easy to like, and he had become a fast friend.

That and the whole getting Mikey's money back and finding him a job thing. Mikey owed him big time for that.

Mikey sat and greeted Tofu, yawning as he did so. He really should have tried to sleep more.

"Mornin' Tofu. Got enough muffins there?"

"No, but I was told you aren't supposed to 'hog' them. Here, have

one.”

Tofu handed over a muffin, and Mikey was surprised to find he was feeling hungry again.

While they ate, they talked about what had happened yesterday. Apparently Tofu had gone to the Red Zone, snuck into an Espada hideout, and rescued some guy named Jasper from the super villain Sanguine. Completely crazy, and yet Tofu had spent a mere five minutes retelling that adventure (glossing over most of the details), and then went on to tell Mikey about the company dinner in excruciating detail for nearly a half hour. That and a game on his phone called Griblin Tamer.

“Would you happen to know how to get past level five?”

“Nah, I’m not too big on mobile games.”

“Dang, and Viper wouldn’t tell me either. I’ll ask Nicole later then.”

“Why don’t you just look it up?”

“Nicole said only cheaters do that.”

“And asking others isn’t cheating?”

“No, it’s teamwork.”

Mikey laughed. Tofu was definitely an odd guy, but he was a good one.

They talked a bit longer, and Mikey was immensely glad to find out Tofu was on the same job crew today, but eventually they finished up

and made to head out. Unexpectedly, Tofu headed in the direction of the gym.

“Tofu, where are you going? Garage is this way.”

“Morning training with Adder. I didn’t get to yesterday.”

“The job starts in like an hour.”

“Which gives us an hour to train. Are you not coming?”

“Ehhhh…” Mikey remembered getting the stuffing knocked out of him during orientation, and he wasn’t exactly eager to repeat the experience.

“Come on Mikey. You can’t miss both food *and* training. They’re important!” said Tofu.

Mikey let himself get dragged to the gym, and an hour later he was reconsidering whether Tofu was really a nice guy. Adder’s workout regime was *brutal*, or at least more than he had ever wanted to do in the morning. By the end of the hour, he felt like he had done more exercise than in every P.E. class put together, and Tofu hadn’t even broken a sweat despite getting tossed around the practice mat by Adder. Damn exercise addicts!

He grumbled half-heartedly, and rinsed his head under a faucet in the bathroom before heading to the garage with Tofu. There they found Fred and Brilla (minus hangovers today he noted), and another newbie called Tedic.

“Da fuck. Someone give you a swirly?” asked Tedic.

“Finished a workout.”

“Sure, whatever you say man.”

Mikey… didn’t much care for the guy. Yesterday Fred and Brilla had admitted to being hungover, and pulled seniority to have Mikey and Tedic do most of the heavy lifting while they set up the electronics. Tedic… had done *some* of his share of the work. Between talking about his “experience” in other gangs and how he was going to “climb the ranks,” with a not-so-subtle implication that Mikey should get into his good graces while he could.

“Alright guys, same as yesterday, load the truck and let’s skedaddle,” said Fred, this time helping to load the truck himself now that he was sans hangover.

Tofu and Mikey chatted about the Gribblin game Tofu was trying to beat, and Mikey got a kick out of Tedic realizing he was already friends with Tofu. Tedic tried to join the smalltalk, but was woefully uninformed about games, or cooking, or any of the other topics that Tofu tended to rapidly switch to, and Mikey had to admit that watching Tedic try and fail to endear himself to Tofu was in no small amount cathartic after all his big talk yesterday.

The last of the boxes got stored, they piled in, and they drove off for what Mikey hoped would be another uneventful day.

The job was simple enough. Take the devices Socket had made, and install them in places where they wouldn’t be noticed. Under mailboxes, on top of buildings, some of the devices were even small enough to tape to the sides of buildings and spray paint over them so

that they fit in with the years of old graffiti.

Of course, in a few cases they had to check spots where devices had failed for one reason or another and try to recover them, which was why Mikey had climbed up to a billboard to replace a real clunker of a gizmo. This one was really strapped tight for some reason.

ZaP "Damnit!"

Mikey cursed a bit. That static had hurt for real, if it wasn't a battery leak or something. He hoped the gizmo wouldn't explode on him or something stupid.

"Yo Mikey hurry it up already!" Tedic yelled from below where he was keeping "lookout."

"Gimme a sec, this one's finicky!" he yelled back. Bleh, he wished for the hundredth time that he had gone with a different nickname then his own, but he hadn't been thinking all that clearly when he was in the interview. He doubted he could have actually kept anything from an organization like Hellion's anyways, but at least it would have kept idiots like Tedic from yelling it in public where anyone could hear.

He searched through the bag of tools he had lugged up with him, and found a pair of heavy duty gloves which he pulled from the bag. Then he got to work trying to unstrap the belts and fastenings keeping the device in place. Why the hell was this one so complicated? Some of Socket's devices were rather ambitious (one had been indistinguishable from a large blue mailbox), but this one was a bit strange. Most of Socket's stuff looked like it could have come off an assembly line, but this one looked like it had been hastily

slapped together from dumpster parts. In fact, if Mikey didn't know any better he would think-

Snap! Twang!

One of the belts he had been trying to loosen snapped, and several metal braces and wires snapped together on his hand like a bear trap, before the whole thing sparked to life.

"Holy fuck!" Mikey yelled as the rogue gizmo tried to zap him into submission. Luckily the gloves worked, and the booby trap (for what else could it be) spent itself without doing more than sending a tingle up his arm and giving him goosebumps, though his hand remained stuck in the contraption.

"Mikey! What the hell happened!?"

"It was booby trapped! My hand's stuck in it! Get up here and help me open this thing!"

"Uh, can't you open it!?"

"Not one-handed, now get up here!"

"I'll uh, I'll get the others! Be right back with help!" Tedic yelled as he ran down the alley.

"Tedic! TEDIC! Goddamnit." Mikey struggled with the trap before slumping and giving up. He didn't want to accidentally make it worse somehow, you never knew what surprises a gizmo might have for you.

He settled in to wait for help, hopefully they'd get here soon. *Someone* had set this trap, and none of the possibilities were good. A hero (unlikely given the type of trap), a vigilante, some villain not associated with Hellion. A vigilante might just rough him up a bit, but if it was a villain…

"You alright mister?"

"GAH!" Mikey jumped at the unexpected voice, and spun as best he could with his hand trapped to look at the source. It was a kid! A mutant kid. He was about twelve if Mikey had to guess, and had an extra pair of arms that stuck out of tears in the kid's shirt. The kid's overalls were weighed down with the weight of all the items in his pockets, including a slingshot that stuck out of one, and for some reason he was wearing a pair of swimming goggles.

Mikey gaped at the new arrival, unsure what to make of him. Sure he was just a kid, but it was Odd Summer right now. Mikey had forgotten about the fourth option of the trap just being set by some nutjob.

"Need any help?" asked the kid.

"Um… I mean, if you can get this trap off my hand," said Mikey unsurely.

"Sure, no problem! Two hundred bucks."

Mikey sputtered. Was this kid actually trying to *shake him down*!?

"I seem to have left my wallet at home kid," spat Mikey.

“Awwww, oh well,” said the kid in a sad sounding voice. Then he perked up, “Oh! Neat bag!” and before Mikey could stop him the kid grabbed the bag of tools, pulling it out of his reach.

“Hey! Give that back!” yelled Mikey, straining to reach.

“I will, I will. Oh *hey*! A cold iron! I’ve always wanted one of those,” and the kid stuffed the tool into a pocket before rummaging around the sack more.

Mikey began to struggle harder with his caught hand. He wasn’t about to let this *brat* steal from him. True, he didn’t know how valuable a cold iron was, but he would rather not explain how he lost a bag of tinker tools to a fucking *twelve-year-old*. Damn, his hand was really wedged in there, but maybe if he could…

Mikey wrenched one of the looser metal bands away from his trapped hand, and strained for all he was worth. It took a few good pulls, but finally his hand slipped free from the glove, and he fell backwards away from the trap...

...and perilously close to the edge of the thin metal walkway meant for workers to service the billboard. He gasped and scrambled back from the edge in a hurry, trying to keep his heart from leaping out of his throat.

“Later loser!” came the young kid’s voice. Mikey’s head whipped in the direction it came from, only to see the kid leap from the metal walkway to a second level bridge nearly twenty feet away, a leap that Mikey was sure he couldn’t have made. The kid landed easily and ran for it, soon out of sight around a corner. He hadn’t taken the bag of tools with him, but there was no telling how many he had stolen.

"...damnit."

Hahaha "By a little kid!" laughed Tedic, to Mikey's chagrin. If Tedic had actually *been there* it wouldn't have happened.

Mikey had met Tedic and Fred on the way back to the van, and Mikey had explained about the strange kid who had stolen his tools.

"Ah don't feel too bad, we didn't bring any tools that are hard to replace," said Fred dismissively, "And the kid was probably a member of the Tinker Tots, they operate in this area."

"The *Tinker Tots*?" asked Mikey, disbelievingly. Tedic went into a new round of laughter.

"Don't sound so surprised," said Fred, "You know all that weird architecture north of Ashwood St? They do most of that. They're also like half the reason we need to replace Socket's network devices so often, they steal them for parts."

Mikey mulled that over for a while. "They're really all tinkers? I thought that was rare."

"Eh, probably only one or two of them are real tinkers. Just think of them as the local ragamuffins. They cause trouble, but it's nothing too serious."

"Why don't we just get rid of em?" asked Tedic.

"Pft, cause they're a bunch of kids, that's why. What you want us to do? Blow them up? Besides, sometimes they're useful."

They made they're way back to the van, and drove to the next area to set up more devices. Although Tedic insisted on telling the story to Tofu and Brilla himself, to Mikey's annoyance.

"Are they a threat?" asked Tofu seriously, derailing Tedic's mirth.

"Naw, just a bunch of brats," replied Brilla.

"Okay," confirmed Tofu, and he went back to fiddling with his phone.

Mikey shivered in the sudden cold atmosphere the question had created. He was glad it had shut Tedic up, but the way Tofu asked reminded Mikey of how Tofu had handled almost killing his mother's boyfriend.

Mechanically.

"Hold on back there!" yelled Brilla, as she wrenched the steering wheel and sent them careening into a tight alleyway, just barely making the fit. Behind them a cop car screeched right before it hit the corner of one of the enclosing buildings, as it hadn't been at a good enough angle to copy the maneuver. The van full of minions burst through the alley at the opposite end, and quickly (and at a safer speed) headed down the street and into more labyrinthe alleyways to make sure they had lost the cop car.

“See? Easy peasy,” said Brilla.

Mikey wasn’t too sure about that. Brilla had been swearing up a storm not two seconds before they ditched the cop car, and Fred had a white-knuckle death grip on the overhead handle. Mikey wasn’t feeling too disgruntled, but he had distracted himself by keeping the boxes of tinker devices from bouncing around the van. Tofu was his usual unflappable self, and Tedic had his head between his knees as he muttered prayers beneath his breath.

“What now?” asked Tofu.

“Now we continue to the next spot, same ol’ same ol’,” answered Brilla.

Tedic groaned, and Mikey suppressed one himself. He was ready to be done for the day.

“We can get lunch afterwards,” Fred offered, “Feeling a bit peckish myself.”

They drove to the next spot, and left Tofu to guard the van while they split into pairs to place the final few devices. Luckily Mikey was paired with Fred this time.

Fred navigated up to the second level, and they slapped thin devices disguised as yard sale posters to out of the way walls as they went. But there was a small surprise waiting for them as they came to a makeshift bridge that had been set up where the original architecture had been destroyed. It was a metal and wire affair that seemed solid

enough, but it was blocked by a short barricade that had been set up, complete with a miniature toll booth to the side that was manned by a kid in a fake police getup.

"Ten bucks to cross the bridge," said the kid.

Mikey raised an eyebrow, and Fred just laughed before saying, "Nice try kid, but Fortress City doesn't have toll booths."

"Well *this* bridge doesn't belong to the city, we made it. Twenty bucks to cross."

Fred rolled his eyes and said, "Yeah, I think we'll pass on your death trap," and gestured for Mikey to follow him. They headed back the way they had come, but were surprised to run into… another barricade. It had been rolled into place behind them, complete with its own little tollbooth and another ragamuffin to man it.

"Toll is fifty bucks," said the young kid.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny kids, but we've got real work to do," said Fred, and he stepped over the barrier.

"Hey! You can't do that!" said the tiny toll officer.

Mikey followed Fred over the barrier, and they got about twenty feet before something whizzed by and hit Fred in the head.

"**AGH**! Fuck!" yelled Fred as he clutched his head where the stone hit

him.

“That’s what you get you jerks!” yelled another voice, one Mikey recognized. It was the four-armed kid that had taken his tools. The kid was standing back behind the barricade with the toll booth operator.

“Hey! That’s the brat who stole the tools!” Mikey exclaimed.

“Really? And hey look, my patience for kids just reached its end,” said Fred, scowling. He approached the barrier, and the four-armed thief pulled the smaller kid back, but that wasn’t Fred’s aim. He walked over to the miniature toll booth and kicked it, denting the side.

“Hey!” yelled the kids, but Fred ignored them and continued to destroy the toll booth. The four-armed kid with the slingshot started taking more shots at Fred, which only prompted Mikey to help Fred trash the kid’s little business venture faster.

He… did feel a bit bad when the toll booth operator started crying, but it was fair comeuppance as far as he was concerned. The trashing of the barricade continued until suddenly the kids scattered, and Mikey had just enough time to wonder why before a deep voice spoke behind them.

“Well I’ll be, have Hellion’s Henchmen sunk to bullying kids now? For shame.”

Mikey turned around and froze. He knew the man before him, it was hard not to. Brick could be seen on the local news all the time, usually beating up two-story monsters with his fists. He was one of the supers that didn’t bother with a full suit, just camo pants, a tank top, and a blue mask that only covered the top half of his face. Brick

looked smaller in person than Mikey expected, but he knew that was just an optical illusion from normally seeing Brick ten feet tall and beating up evil-doers with his power on.

Mikey was in so much shit.

“Stay calm,” whispered Fred, then he raised his voice and addressed the hero, “Hello officer, can we help you with something?”

“Yeah, I came here on a report that some kids were running an illegal racket. Glad to see I can arrest some real criminals instead of wasting my time lecturing kids.”

“Don’t know what you mean, we haven’t-”

“Save it. You’re wearing masks at the scene of a crime, and we both know I need less than that to haul you in. We’re all gonna take a little walk down to street level and wait for the good police officers to come pick you up. Unless you’d like to try running?...”

Fred didn’t respond, instead just dropping the bag of devices he’d been carrying and putting his hands up. Mikey followed suit, and Brick picked up the bag before having them walk in front of him. Soon they were at street level where Brick had them sit on the curb.

Mikey was mortified. He was getting arrested by a hero he had cheered for multiple times in the past, and now Tim was going to find out he’d been arrested for henching. Unless Hellion’s promises of lawyer support were real. He reallllly hoped the lawyers were real.

“You know, we really weren’t doing anything. Those kids actually stole from **us**,” Mikey hesitantly ventured.

Brick snorted, “You must be new. Let me tell you the same advice I tell all you minions. Get out, before I have to kick you out.”

Mikey shut up (it had been worth a shot right?), and sat contemplating his fate. He expected a police cruiser to show up any second now, which was why he was really confused when a black van pulled up instead, and Tofu stuck his head out the window.

“Hey guys, we’ve been looking all over for you,” said Tofu.

Mikey gaped at Tofu. Was he just seeing things? Nope, Fred was goggling too. And Brick was already growing as his power took hold (*holy shit he’s big*) .

“Step out of the van and put your hands up! Only warning!” yelled Brick.

The sliding side door of the van opened, and Brick tensed for a fight, only to freeze at the sight of the occupant. Out stepped the four-armed kid who had been causing trouble for the minions! The kid looked around with wide eyes before running to Brick and hiding behind him.

“He was trying to steal more stuff from us,” said Tofu, “You should arrest him.”

Brick glanced down at the kid, who stuttered, “I-I um, I s-s-stole their s-stuff. It was m-my fault. S-sorry.”

Brick looked back up at Tofu, “Be that as it may, when the patrol

shows up you are **all** coming to the station on suspicion of henching."

"But we were going to get lunch."

Apparently Brick didn't know how to react to that any more than the rest of the minions. Which meant the awkward silence was only broken when the police patrol vehicle blazed down the street while on fire. Everyone stared at it as it passed.

"I've been noticing that a lot lately," said Tofu.

Mikey made it home after what felt like forever. He was sore, tired, and with more than one bruise to both his body and ego. Brick had given up on arresting them, apparently deciding that getting the kid away from the strange powered minion, and coordinating with the efforts to stop the flaming squad car, was more important than arresting some minions that had allegedly done nothing wrong. Fred and Brilla called off the rest of the job after that debacle, and they had limped themselves to a Mega Burger for Tofu before calling it quits.

Mikey had been tempted to hand in his notice and call the entire thing quits. This had been such a close call! But upon arriving back at the base there had been a paycheck waiting for him.

A fat paycheck, with more than two zeros. His emotions and logic

warred over his sudden riches, when finally his brain gave up, and he decided to shove the decision to another day. Mikey dragged himself home not soon after, collapsing into bed and falling dead asleep.

It was several hours later when he woke. It was still evening, and Mikey could have slept longer easily, but his phone was ringing. He grabbed it to turn it off, but the caller I.D. stopped him, it was Tofu. Hesitantly he answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hey Mikey.”

“Hey Tofu… everything alright?”

“Sorta. I tried to cook some tofu burgers, but I didn’t have any pans, so I tried to use my hands and that didn’t work, and now my stove is on fire. Would you happen to have a frying pan I can borrow?”

“…”

“…”

“…I’ll be over in a bit.”

Ingredients (Glossary)

Tofu: Myself. Fusion of bio-mechanical core unit with organic cell structures. Micro units provide variability of form. Human.exe provides advanced combat/social problem solving abilities. Human.exe integration going well.

Hellion's Henchmen:

Hellion: Mask is red horned helm with transparent golden faceplate. Boss of Hellion's Henchmen. Flame powers (assumed pyrokinetic). Explosions. Do not anger. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 0.012%

Imp: Mask is red powered minion helmet with two small horns. Teleporter, short range. Can teleport self and small objects. Uses handguns. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 37.3%

Socket: Mask is tinker goggles with various attachments. Tinker. Makes elevators, masks. Focus on fabrication? Strange accent. Combat potential unclear (tinker designation). Estimate chance of confrontation survival using known factors: 89.5%

Sandra: Hellion's Henchmen HR department head, handles legal issues. Strangely perceptive. Seems protective of younger employees (note: maintain young age persona). Estimate chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Adder: Mask is standard minion black domino mask. Hellion's

Henchmen melee combat trainer. No power detected, does not hench. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 99%. Estimated chance of winning spar: 1.45%

Rattleback: Mask is standard minion black domino mask. Hellion's Henchmen Quartermaster. Manages equipment for minions. Values efficiency and lack of waste. No power use detected. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 62%, accounting for potential explosive weaponry.

Viper: Mask is standard minion black domino mask. Real name Lily. Mutant. Scaled hands with sharp claws, scales extend up forearms, shoulders, neck, to sides of head. Has embedded metal 'piercings' (combat weakness). Works with Sandra in HR department. Likes rectangular 'cellphone' (combat weakness?). Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 96%

Smoke: Mask is grey powered minion mask with tinted faceplate, impression of human skull. Powers unknown. Combat potential unknown. Appears to be "faded" and "shadowed" (note: ask Tim about "shadow powers"). Always seen with Hellion. Threat Estimate: High.

HH new hires:

Ifrit: Mask is standard minion bone-white helmet mask. Real name Cindy. Mutant. Wears red metal gauntlets. Shoots explosive fireballs from hands, mutant ability or aspect of gauntlets unclear. Peripheral modifications: second set of transparent eyelids, fireproof chemical in sweat, raspy voice (aspect of mutation?). Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 52% (WARNING: Ifrit is offspring of Hellion.

DO NOT ENGAGE)

Olson: Mask is standard minion bone-white helmet mask. Previously worked for Hellion. Wears red shirts. Power returns him to life uninjured upon death (Jealousy)! Assume offensive capabilities equal to normal human. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Gregor: Mask is standard minion bone-white helmet mask. Mutant. Eight feet tall, with green scales encasing entire body, above average human strength, claimed to be knife proof (note: acquire sample when possible). Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 98%

HH Team 3:

Pebbles: Mask is standard minion bone-white helmet mask. Mutant. Has metallic platelets embedded in skin/flesh at key points, providing reinforcement. Resistant to blunt force trauma. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 98%

Buzzer: Mask is standard minion bone-white helmet mask. Sound based power, creates sonic vibrations, can listen to sounds from a distance, can detect quiet sounds. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 96%

Fred: Mask is standard minion black domino mask. Standard male human. Bad at drinking. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Brilla: Mask is standard minion black domino mask. Standard female human. Bad at drinking. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

People I like Social Resources:

Jasper P. Barnigan: entrepreneur of odd jobs and information broker extraordinaire. Mutant. Has four eyes (low-light vision). Humanoid, but covered in green carapace. Seems to know everyone, and a little about everything. Taught me about lunch. Valuable source of information; prioritize his survival. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 110%

Nicole: Mutant, non-humanoid. Freely teaches information, has no faction. Design matches organism designated: “scorpion,” albeit heavily modified by mutavus. Acid spit, fast reflexes, claws are strong, practiced combat maneuvers. Valuable designs, but is source of free information and is possible ally; consume only if necessary (observe for chances to “sample”). Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 37%

Mikey: Human. Met at “school.” Shares food unprompted; prioritize his survival. Valuable social resource. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Tim: Human. Met at “school.” Mikey’s friend. Has extensive knowledge of super heroes and power gain. Valuable social resource; prioritize his survival. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Maggie: Owner of Maggie's Sunrise Diner. Makes the best tofu burgers in E13 sector. Shares food unprompted; prioritize her survival. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Heroes:

Brick: Mask is blue half-face mask. Leader of E13 hero faction, tall, has super strength in addition to activatable combat mode (size increase, appears to gain rock-like armor). Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 15%

Magenta: Mask is magenta half-face mask. Durable forcefield power. Capable of flight. Forcefield defends whole body, and can shift size and shape, but seems to be concentrated on hands. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 12%

Turbo: Mask is grey head cover, leaves mouth uncovered. Velocity/ Acceleration power, can travel at speeds exceeding bullet velocities. Weakness: while strong for a normal human, power does not grant strength. Hits for substantially less than "mass times acceleration equation" would suggest. Countermeasures successfully implemented. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 27%

The Guardian: Mask is small blue 'domino mask', does not conceal identity. According to Tim power is "Vector Control." Capable of flight, and withstanding explosions. I owe him lunch. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 93% (documented evidence that The Guardian does not kill). Estimated chance of confrontation victory: 12%

Villains:

The Merc: Mask is black, covered-face helmet. Powers unclear, uses devices. Capable of flight, and shooting explosive fireballs from hands. Kill when feasible. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 6%

Sanguine: Former high-ranking member of the Espada faction. Had the ability to control free-flowing blood, both his and others. Weakness: required specific mix of blood cells and plasma. Deceased.

Frankie: Former low-ranking member of the Espada faction. Had the ability to create glowing green blades floating above his forearms. Blades vaporized solid matter, cutting through most materials. Weakness: blades could not change shape or position, high-density objects slowed vaporization, and therefore cutting ability. Deceased.

Acid-Woman: Name unknown. Former low-ranking member of the Espada faction. Power activated during confrontation. Had the ability to produce a high-quality acid which she was immune to. “Dissolved” upon death. Produced acid did not immediately disperse. (Note to self: research “bad trigger”). Deceased.

New Dawn Inc: Name of faction that created me. Strong faction, highly competent and well-armed soldiers/henchmen. Estimated reaction to my escape from facility unknown: Avoid.

Dr. Mason: Member of New Dawn Inc. Scientist, leader of team that likely created me. Intelligent, gives food unprompted, gives good advice. May have knowledge of weaknesses: Kill when feasible.

Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Brett Savvy: Member of New Dawn Inc. Scientist who worked with Dr. Mason. Intelligent, appeared to be highly involved in project. May have knowledge of weaknesses: Kill when feasible. Estimated chance of confrontation survival: 100%

Darksiders: Biker gang situated south of Ashwood St. Friendly and helpful. Notable members: Teddy.

Tinker Tots: “Street Urchin” gang. Situated north of Ashwood St. Concentrates activities on devices/gizmos/gadgets/money. Architectural modifications in area are a result of their activities. Members comprised predominantly of ‘orphan’ children with mutant modifications or tinker abilities. Maggie’s Sunrise Diner within their area of activity: maintain cordial relations.

Ch25 Kitchen Prep

Fireproof is not heatproof. Something to keep in mind in the future.

To compensate for not having a frying pan, I tried to encase my hands in the fireproof chemical I found in my suit and Ifrit's sweat, but the stove uses a heat-coil to transfer heat into the pans. Flesh doesn't transfer heat very well at all, and when my hands reached a high enough temperature to start chemical reactions, they fell apart from micro-units self-destructing. This in turn dumped a bunch of dust and flesh onto the heat coils, which started a small fire. Especially the oils and grease in the tofu patty, those took a while to burn out. The next attempt was to hold the patty over the coils with a knife, but the coils seem to only transfer heat through solid objects, and placing the patty on the coils directly just started another fire. I gave up and called Mikey after a 'neighbor' came to see if everything was fine.

Admittedly, I may have been a bit hasty in trying to cook the burgers without a pan. The tofu patties were kept frozen at the store, and I was worried that they would go bad before I could acquire a pan of my own (the bag says to keep refrigerated until used). I needn't have worried, one of the kitchen devices was a cold storage box called a 'refrigerator', a fact that a confused Mikey pointed out when I explained what happened and why. I need a good backstory to explain why I'm so ignorant of common human objects and terms. I'll think about it.

At least Mikey's attention was somewhat diverted from my ignorance when I told him the address. He insisted on using the elevators to get to me, as my current dwelling was apparently in a 'rough neighborhood'. I met him back at the base, in the elevator corridor, since he would need a keycard to use the apartment elevator. He

stepped off his normal elevator with a bag that I presumed held the pan I would need.

“Hey Tofu. From your description I expected you to be extra crispy.”

“I already regenerated the damage.”

“Oof, I was joking. So you actually fried yourself? Musta hurt.”

“Extremely.”

Mikey stopped moving and blinked at me.

“Whyyy… would you do that then?” he asked.

“Because I wanted to make a tofu burger.”

Long moments passed in silence as we waited for the elevator, Mikey staring at me the whole time. It started to get a little uncomfortable actually. Fortunately the elevator arrived, and snapped Mikey out of it. Unfortunately, it prompted him to start asking more questions.

On one hand, I like Mikey’s questions because they tend to point out flaws in my disguise that I need to account for. On the other hand, Mikey is too perceptive sometimes, and he often comes dangerously close to asking questions I never want to have to answer. It’s good that I’ve been getting so much practice at diverting attention from the main topic of conversation. I’d hate to have to kill him.

Finishing our elevator ride (during which I let him know that *yes* I can turn off my pain receptors, and *no* I’m not a ‘masochist’), I led

him down the halls to my apartment. We passed other residents and dodged playing children, while I explained to him that pain receptors are an important combat tool, and that turning them off is a bad idea.

"True enough I guess, but if you aren't fighting anyone, and your hands are already **on fire**, wouldn't that be a good time to turn them off?" pointed out Mikey.

"Uh…" Admittedly I couldn't think of a counter argument to that logic. It just hadn't occurred to me to turn them off. Pain was just another sense before I got Human.exe, and afterwards… well I guess I was just used to it by then. There were a *lot* of tests back at the lab. And besides, I wasn't going to let some pain get between me and learning to cook tofu burgers.

We arrived at my apartment, and I let us in. I was glad to find that the annoying alarm had finally shut itself off, although the apartment still smelled a bit like smoke.

"Whoa dude. Crack a window or something."

Okay, maybe a lot like smoke.

Mikey headed to the kitchen corner as I opened the window again. Then he pulled out a pan from the bag he brought, and surprisingly a lot of other items. A stack of paper plates, plastic sporks like the ones at the school cafeteria, and some napkins.

“Man, I’m glad I brought plates. You said you moved in recently, but its pretty bare bones in here. Haven’t moved your stuff in yet?”

“I didn’t have anything to move. I keep all my stuff with me.”

Mikey gave me the same type of look that Sandra did when she found out I was homeless. Then he turned back to the supplies and busied himself organizing them.

“Sooo… did you know some of the other minions have a betting pool about you?” asked Mikey.

“What about?”

“On where you’re from.”

Uh oh.

I tried to divert the question; “…They want to know the sector?”

“Pft, no dude. They’re betting on how you joined the masked life. It’s kinda obvious you’re used to this kind of thing, no one is this casual about hanging around so many supers and criminals. Like, if you were trying to hide it you weren’t doing a very good job,” he finished putting the ingredients and supplies in order, then turned to me, “Right now the top bet is that you’re a villain’s kid.”

Relief. They were quite a bit off in their guess. “That’s a poor bet. Powers aren’t hereditary as far as I’m aware.”

“That’s what I said, although Tedic is convinced. Mind giving me the insider info? The pool’s pretty high now.”

“Um…”

Mikey smirked and raised his hand in a stop gesture, “Say no more. Anyways here, let me show you how to make a burger sans self-immolation.”

Mikey proceeded to cook two tofu patties from start to finish. It seemed rather simple, although I found it somewhat distressing that he didn’t follow a recipe. He even added some ingredients that weren’t mentioned in any of the recipes I found. He asserted that cooking was an art form, and it takes practice to find your own style. This part I understood completely, it was similar to martial arts, and developing a combat style that suited your abilities.

Mikey’s burgers were not like Maggie’s, however they were still tasty. I cooked the rest of the patties I had bought, some with Mikey’s method, some with the recipe, and some with a few modifications I thought might be nice (Mikey hypocritically criticising my use of extra sugar on these patties). We sat and ate once I was done, and for once Mikey actually put down a decent amount, eating at least a third of what I did.

Mikey finished his last burger, burped, and leaned against the kitchen counter. “Man, didn’t really realize how hungry I was until the smell hit me.”

“Well you didn’t eat any lunch after all. You should really eat more.”

“You sound like my grandma,” Mikey chuckled.

“I’m serious. You never know when something is going to happen. You wouldn’t want to be low on energy when it does.”

“Pft, if I stuffed myself like you do I’d be too bloated to run. Although I will admit that I didn’t expect just how much crap happens while on the job. Can’t believe it’s only Wednesday. That job with the explosion was barely on Sunday, but it feels like it happened last year or something.”

“Maybe your internal timescale is faulty?”

“No you doof. It’s just so much crazy stuff,” he sighed and let his head fall back, “I’m starting to think this job might be a bit more than I can chew.”

“Uh, take smaller bites?”

Mikey rolls his eyes, “I mean this job might be more than I can handle. I’m really grateful you helped me get it, don’t get me wrong, but I’ve been thinking about quitting.”

“Have you been at risk of dying?”

“What? No. But we’ve had quite a few close calls with the heroes dude. Turbo was Sunday, Brick today, and you’ve even had it out with Magenta. You’ve basically had run-ins with all three of E13’s heroes in a four day span! That’s nuts!”

“I’ve also met three of E12’s heroes.”

“See? I figured heroes would show up eventually, but *this* often is just ridiculous! We’ll never make it through Odd Summer without being arrested.”

“It didn’t seem that bad when they brought me to the station in E12 though. We were only there a few hours and I even got to eat donuts.”

“Dude, that barely even counts, that wasn’t a real arrest. And no offense, but you have powers and I don’t. I doubt Hellion’s lawyers will be quite as prompt when they are just trying to get some grunts released. If I get pinched I’m basically on my own.”

“I’ll try to help you.”

He rolled his eyes, but muttered, “Thanks.”

I considered his concerns. We had indeed been running into supers

on a regular basis, but I had thought this was the norm, especially considering the job description. It matched my experiences after escaping the lab at least. Plus the heroes wouldn't even try to kill you, only villains, vigilantes, and monsters tried to do that. Other villains were mostly intimidated by Hellion, vigilantes were rare, and monsters were a risk no matter what you did.

To be fair, getting arrested was probably a much larger concern for Mikey than for myself. I had no social position to defend, and my own abilities would likely facilitate an escape even without outside help. Hellion's Henchmen didn't strike me as the type of organization to go back on it's word, but if they did indeed withdraw lawyer support Mikey would be at far more risk than myself.

"You have a point. It might be smart to quit now."

Mikey seemed a bit surprised by my sudden proclamation, "You think so? I sorta thought you were rather gung-ho about this."

"Well, for me this job is perfect. It's proven quite profitable, and the benefits counteract my biggest concerns, but your situation is different. You have to measure the risk versus reward."

He grit his teeth, "Yeah, that's probably why I'm so torn on this. The pay is *good*. A few more jobs like the last one and I'll have the entire first year paid for, not just a single semester. But if I get pinned even once..."

Hmm, a possibility for great return, but with a chance of complete disaster. Personally I would never take such a gamble, but I didn't know many jobs that would give the necessary payout for this college advancement Mikey was set on.

"Would a job with the heroes be a better fit for you perhaps?"

Mikey scoffed, “Central only takes people with powers dude, and the non-hero positions are basically fought over tooth-and-nail. I’d be laughed at for trying.”

Hmm, that was indeed a problem. Mikey had little in the way of combat skills. Maybe if he trained with Adder more often he would be able to fight ‘tooth-and-nail’ before summer ends. I’d have to make sure he doesn’t miss any sessions though.

We cleaned up the kitchen supplies (Mikey letting me keep the utensils and pan), and were getting ready to go to the elevator, when the ‘doorbell’ rang.

“Expecting anyone?” asked Mikey.

“No, but it might be one of the neighbors again.”

And a threat wouldn’t use the doorbell anyway. I checked through the ‘peephole’ (a clever little device, I was glad they were standard), but it was only Cindy. I opened the door to see what she wanted.

“Hello Cindy,” I greeted.

She blinked as the air from my apartment hit her, and took a few sniffs. Admittedly it still smelled quite smokey despite the open window. Surprisingly, when she spoke, her voice was not nearly as raspy as I was accustomed to.

“Tofu. You having fire trouble?”

“No, just trying to learn cooking. Some of the results got burnt.”

“Mhm.” Her piercing gaze drifted between Mikey and I for a bit, then she said, “Well don’t burn the place down,” and handed me a small red device, basically a cylinder with some kind of nozzle/handle at the top. Then without another word she abruptly turned and left.

I went to go place the device in the kitchen (a ‘fire extinguisher’ if I was reading the label right), when Mikey spoke up. He seemed a bit… stunned?

“Hey Tofu? Who was that?”

“That was Cindy,” I replied, using her civilian name as she hadn’t been wearing a mask.

“Oh, uh, where do you know her from? She a neighbor?”

“Yes, but I know her from work.”

“Oh. Oh! So she works for HH huh? Haven’t seen her around.”

“Well we do wear masks.”

“Heh, true enough. Still, I think I’d remember a hottie like that, mask or no mask.”

Mikey continued to act a bit odd, muttering to himself about quitting or not quitting. We reached the elevator and both got on, donning our masks before we did so.

“You’re heading to the base too Tofu? What for?” asked Mikey.

“I want to ask one of the lieutenants if they have a place for ranged target practice.”

“Like a gun range?”

“Perhaps, but not for a gun. Sandra says minions shouldn’t use guns, for several reasons.”

I pulled out the weapon I had taken from the four-armed Tinker Tot.

“I was thinking slingshots.”

As it turned out, there was not a dedicated ‘gun range’, but there was a very large room with a lot of durable targets placed at the far end of it. Seems it was mostly used by powered minions for target practice; the walls and targets were pitted and scarred with various blast marks.

Mikey had followed me down to the target practice room despite the late hour, apparently curious what I was going to do with a “flimsy slingshot.” Truthfully it wasn’t the slingshot itself I cared about so much as the concept of it. Between guns, throwing knives, and a few other weapons I had researched such as a ‘bow’ and ‘crossbow’, the problem with all of them was that they required a specialized ammo. Guns were the worst offenders of this, requiring metal carved in a specific shape with explosive powder set correctly. My few attempts to create a working bullet launcher had either fizzled or nearly blown my arms off. The micro units unfortunately clung to the powder I produced, and made it rather unstable in comparison to the real thing. Outright buying the bullets was a possibility, but it was

expensive! According to Rattleback a single box of fifty bullets could cost over a thousand dollars, not because of production cost, but because they were labeled as highly illegal contraband by Central.

Bows were a much better bet, but once again the ammo was a problem. Bone spikes of the correct size and weight for 'arrows' were easily produced, but once launched the micro units quickly self-destructed, rendering the arrows to powder. My best result was up to twenty feet or so, after which the resulting shards and powder were unlikely to result in fatal wounds. Good for suppressing normal humans perhaps, not so much for mutants or supers.

But a slingshot requires no specific ammo. The concept was similar to the bow, but the power was in the elasticity of the band, and not in the shape of the ammo. This meant I would never be at a lack of ammo. If I ran out I could just take small chunks from my environment (cement, glass, metal, anything!) and launch them as is. No major shifting, no paying money, and easily prepared on the fly. Versatile. The only requirement was an elastic band that could handle the forces I planned to use, and luckily this task my micro units could handle easily.

I tested the slingshot a few times with some rocks I saved, and had Mikey try it a few times just to make sure I wasn't missing something obvious. Nothing really to it, just an elastic band and some aiming required. The next step was to begin testing different organic material. I began shifting along one arm, intending to pull out a tendon to start with, when suddenly Mikey protested.

"Agh dude, warn me the next time you do that. Don't wanna lose my dinner."

"What's wrong?"

“That thing you’re doing with your arm, that’s your power right? No offense but it looks pretty disgusting. Like a scene from The Thing.”

I had no clue what he was talking about, although his reaction was surprisingly strong. Thinking back, I realized the only humans who had really seen my shifting up close were Magenta, and humans I had killed. Had they also been averse to the nature of my shifting? Perhaps, but I couldn’t be sure if there reactions were disgust or fear due to the circumstances. If humans reacted adversely to my shifting I’d have to account for it in the future.

“Is it really that bad?”

“Well… yeah kinda. Hate to say it, but it looks kinda like mutavus on fast forward. We had to watch a video of it once in Health Ed.”

Not too surprising. If mutavus worked as described it had to be doing cellular reconstruction in a manner similar to my micro units. The results would look quite similar to someone who wasn’t aware of the specific mechanics. Still, better to distance myself from the idea of mutation, humans were very skittish when it came to mutavus.

“I can assure you it isn’t mutavus, it’s just a result of my power. You don’t have to stay if it makes you uncomfortable though.”

“I’m not worried about that, it’s just kinda hard to watch on a full stomach. You gonna be doing it a lot?”

“Yes, I need to do all the design testing manually.”

“Then I think I’ll bow out for now, it’s been a long day anyways.”

“Alright. Will I see you tomorrow? Or have you decided to resign?”

“Oh. Um. I’ll see you tomorrow, gonna think about it a bit more for now.”

“Okay. Later Mikey, and thanks for the pan.”

“Ha, no prob man. Laters.”

The next day, Mikey and I helped distribute the last of the devices Socket had for us. It went even smoother than last time. The only interesting event was when we met with what was apparently a Tinker Tot lieutenant. He was wearing a mask much like Socket’s, with lots of extra devices attached, as well as a plethora of other makeshift devices strapped around his person. What I found odd was that I estimated his age at thirteen to fifteen years old, and despite appearing to be a tinker he was also a mutant. Throughout the conversation he twisted small devices together, small bits of wire and metal that he flexed into new shapes before storing in his many pockets. I had thought being a tinker was a power, and therefore inaccessible to mutants.

Fred finished up his conversation with the Tinker Tot (basically an apology from both sides for the ‘scuffle’ from yesterday), and when we were far enough away I broached the subject of a tinker/mutant with him.

“I thought mutants couldn’t be tinkers.”

“What’s that Tofu?”

“The Tinker Tot. He was assembling devices as well as wearing them, but Pebbles said mutants can’t get powers.”

“Oh, umm…” he looked back the way we had come, “...maybe he’s

just practiced? The Tots do a lot of work with gizmos and junk. Or maybe his benedicci reaction carried over after he mutated?"

"Benedicci reactions can do that?"

"Sure, wouldn't be the first time benedicci made someone smarter. Mutavus wouldn't throw that away."

"Hmm…" I wasn't so sure. The way the Tinker Tot assembled those gizmos had been… like a trance, like he wasn't aware he was doing it. It reminded me a lot of Socket at his workstation.

"Hey, don't take my word for it man. I'm no expert," said Fred, "Weirder stuff than a mutant with powers has happened. It's called **Odd** Summer for a reason."

Good point.

Nothing else happened on Thursday, and I spent the rest of the day testing slingshot designs. My hope was to make the launcher compact and versatile. If I could get it right, it should be able to handle multiple ammo types in addition to whatever I picked up. I hadn't completely given up on arrows.

And I wonder what the policy on grenades is?...

Friday morning was a bit different from normal. While I didn't have a

“job” to do, I was still required to attend a small orientation for the upcoming job on Saturday.

On my way to the orientation I received a text message from Nicole, an unusual occurrence. While she often responded to my texts (I messaged her about Gribblin Tamer often), she had yet to initiate one herself, although I immediately understood why she did in this instance.

> Nicole: Hey Tofu? By any chance did you hear anything back from the police? Another monster body turned up.

Oh! Another bio-weapon body. Maybe this one would reveal more valuable information.

> Tofu: I have to go to an orientation for my job, but I’ll come over when it’s done.

I sent the message and headed for the orientation room. She sent several messages back saying I didn’t need to come in person, but I pretended to not be watching for messages and ignored them. I wanted an excuse to get my hands on the bio-weapon.

At the orientation room I met up with several other powered minions, Ifrit, Gregor, Olson, Pebbles, and several others who I hadn’t met before, most of whom were combat model mutants. Imp was there too, his red villain mask standing out starkly, and it seemed he would be leading the meeting.

Once the last minions to arrive were settled (all minions in powered masks surprisingly), Imp started to outline the upcoming job. This one would be a robbery like the last one, but in this case it would be during the day, at a busy location, and civilians would be a big concern. This "bank robbery" was apparently meant to be high-profile on purpose, and the villain who had hired Hellion's Henchmen had a detailed list of requirements that had to be adhered to. Imp passed out packets of paper with specific details.

The instructions were… excessive. Most of it was details on where to be and when, but it also contained specifics on conduct, and what we needed to accomplish in different phases of the plan. Multiple backup plans were provided based on the situation, and there was a confusing section that detailed what to do if… the "robot lemmings" escaped early? Normally I would have approved of such a detailed plan, but the discovery that *each minion* had a different set of instructions specific to them seemed utterly impractical. Surely this "Trebla the Terrific" understood such a complicated plan would never survive application?

Imp finished up the meeting, leaving the minions scratching their heads in confusion and frustration as they puzzled over their own specific instructions. I quickly memorized my packet, before heading over to where the other newbies had gathered. Maybe if I looked at their instructions as well the plan would make more sense?

The reactions to the plans were varied. Gregor seemed as confused as I was, Ifrit seemed focused on memorizing the plans precisely, Olson was surprisingly laughing as he read through the robot lemming section, and Pebbles just sat in his chair with his head in his hands, grumbling about eccentric villains. I decided to ask Pebbles about Trebla, since he seemed to have encountered him before.

“Hey Pebbles? Would you happen to be able to tell me more about the client?”

The other newbies turned at my question, also curious about what Pebbles had to say about the villain. Pebbles raised his head, and sighed before answering.

“Well, as you might have guessed he’s the eccentric type,” he flicked his already crinkled packet, “everything you need to know is probably in these stupid packets. But if it’s advice you want all I can tell you is to brace yourselves for tedium and chaos. You’re about to hench for Trebla the Terrible.”

Ch26 Dining Etiquette

Tedium and chaos aren't concepts that go together if I understand them correctly. Tedium implies repetition of an insignificant task, chaos implies random occurrences; the two don't make sense when put together. But, I was inclined to trust Pebble's opinion since he was an experienced minion. It was probably one of those human concepts that made more sense after you had experienced it, like bittersweet. Either way, I was now quite a bit more apprehensive of this upcoming job. My analysis of Pebble's personality and actions had led me to think that he *liked* chaos and 'wild' henching jobs. A job that gave him pause was cause for concern…

…or maybe he just disliked tedium. He certainly seemed set on destroying the packet of instructions, rolling them up and twisting them like he was.

I looked at and memorized the instructions from several of the other minions. It brought more details into focus, but I was still missing large sections of the overall plan. From what I could make out, most of it seemed to revolve around a planned confrontation with E12's heroes, robot lemming handling instructions, and escape procedures.

I discussed the upcoming job with a few of the other minions. Gregor had never heard of Trebla before, and Olson had heard of Trebla, but never worked with him. Ifrit fortunately did know some information about him. Apparently he was a villain who did "high profile" jobs almost exclusively, often hiring Hellion's Henchmen since he tended to make complicated plans that needed a variety of power sets and talents. Looking up Trebla's info on my phone revealed a lot more was known about him than other villains, at least when it came to his criminal record. Stealing odd items from 'museums', attempting to take over an entire sector in a single night, and threatening to take away Wednesdays were all among the random assortment of crimes

in his criminal history.

I talked a bit more with Gregor, Olson, and Ifrit about Trebla (Olson at least seemed enthusiastic about working with a “big name”), but eventually excused myself. I was eager to see the bio-weapon Nicole had found.

It took an elevator and a bus to get close enough to Manchineel St. that I could walk the rest of the distance. In comparison to the other places I frequented, the tunnel that led to her den was somewhat out of my way, being both south of and far from Ashwood St, but I didn’t mind. There were several food vendors that were only represented in this area. Like Puzzle’s pretzels.

I stopped at the same one I had before and bought a bag of the cheezy buns. Sandra had advised me to be thrifty with vendor food, but in this case I was buying them to bring some to Nicole. When Mikey came over to my apartment, he had brought a lot of other things besides just the pan, utensils and ‘condiments’ among them. When I asked him why, he had claimed his ‘gran-mama’ would slap him from beyond the grave if he went to eat at a friend’s place and didn’t bring anything to share. This was a *terrifyingly* strong power. How did someone attack *while dead*? More importantly, how would you attack them *back*? I had no idea, so the safest bet was to simply comply with his gran-mama’s rule.

I texted ahead to make sure I didn’t surprise Nicole like last time, and reached the specific manhole cover a few minutes later. Wait a minute for the coast to be clear before entering, go down the ladder, bonk an overeager Nessie on the head (it probably smelled the pretzels), and head around the corner bringing Nicole’s den into sight.

“Hello Nicole!” I yelled down the tunnel, and watched as the two “boulders” that blocked one of the intersection tunnels shifted and moved, revealing themselves to be Nicole’s claws (already fully regenerated). She moved until her forward half was sticking a comfortable distance out of the tunnel where she made her home.

“Hey Tofu. I uh, guess you didn’t get my messages?”

“I missed them because I was in an orientation for my job. Here, I brought pretzels,” and I offered her the bag, “I already ate my share, so you can have the rest.”

“Oh! Thank you. You didn’t have to.”

“If I didn’t Mikey’s gran-mama might attack me.”

“...Okay.”

She nibbled on one of the pretzels, but soon excused herself to put the rest away for later. I was starting to worry that Nicole only ate raw food, she seemed less than enthusiastic about the “cooked” food I brought with me. Next time I’ll bring something more suitable. She said rats were disgusting, but maybe I could find another dark-shrieker… or maybe sushi?

“Anyways,” she began, “Like I tried to tell you, you didn’t need to come all the way down here.”

“Don’t you need someone to bring the corpse up for the cops?”

“Well, I was gonna ask my courier, I didn’t mean to make trouble for you. It’s gotta be a hassle to come all the way down here. Especially since you were busy with your job, and it’s Odd Summer on top of that.”

“It’s fine Nicole, no trouble at all. I didn’t even see any cars on fire this time.”

“…Cars on fire?”

“Yeah, apparently they light on fire and then start driving themselves around. You didn’t hear about it? It’s become quite common apparently.”

“I don’t really watch the news. The local stuff is usually just who beat up what today, and the news from Central is the paparazzi fluff. If it’s actually important I’ll catch the emergency broadcast.”

“I see.”

“Anyways… since you’re already here I guess you can take the body then. It’s right here,” and she pointed to a wrapped lump which was obviously the dead bio-weapon, seeing as several warped limbs were sticking out of it. I was definitely interested in it, but there was something I wanted to do first.

“Okay, I’ll bring it up when I go, but there was something else I wanted to talk to you about,” I pulled my phone from my pocket, “I noticed that Gribblin Tamer has a two-player mode.”

I finally got past level five in Gribblin Tamer. My solution was to simply click on every single interactable object until something happened. Clicking on a ‘sword’ embedded into a rock finally wound up being the answer, although I’m unsure how I was supposed to figure it out. It didn’t match the other puzzles up until that point.

When I asked Nicole she said it was clearly a ‘King Arthur’ reference, which turned out to be a very old fiction story. Basically a test of strength to select a new leader. It made sense in context to that level of the game, but I wouldn’t have made the connection without

knowing the story. Just one of those human things you had to know to make sense of.

“I’ll get the monsters and you set the levers,” said Nicole.

“Okay.”

Solving the puzzle had unlocked the ‘multiplayer’ feature in the game, in which you could get different rewards for playing with others. I had been eager to try it, but Mikey didn’t play the game, and Lily refused to play with ‘shrimps’.

“Ack, manticore trap!”

“I see it.”

All in all it was quite interesting, the experience worth more than the promised rewards. The puzzle and maps were modified for two-player gameplay, which meant it served as a cooperation test. I’d never had anything like it back at the lab.

“Uhh, red button or blue button?”

“...Blue?”

Of course, some of the presented challenges still required good reflexes. Which made it all the more impressive that Nicole was able to play on a small flat screen using a pair of claws. True, it was the smaller pair of mandible claws, the ones with ‘digits’, but when compared to myself, and my ability to modify my hands to fit the

phone screen precisely, it made her skill all the more impressive.

“How do you tap the phone so quickly without breaking it?”

“Huh? Oh, I put in a scratch-resistant screen, but I also have a lot of practice with delicate electronics. When I’m scavenging for abandoned gizmos and gadgets sometimes I need to disarm them first.”

“You scavenge for parts? Like the Tinker Tots?”

She looked up from the game for the first time in a while, with a look that I can best describe as a grimace, before going back to it.

“Except I’m actually scavenging, not stealing like those *brats*.”

“I take it you don’t like them.”

“There’s a reason I’m south of Ashwood and they’re north of it. Besides, they take all the best gizmos, or just break them, nothing good left over in their area. The lot of them need a good spanking, the lousy little…”

Her voice trailed off into inaudible mutters for a bit, which switched to a frantic yell as our gribblins triggered a new trap, one she avoided with ease despite her surprise.

“Well it seems your practice with gizmos paid off.”

“Ha, this is nothing! You should see what I can do with thumbs.”

“Alright.”

I waited expectantly. I didn't realize she had thumbs (maybe her claws can shift?), but if that was the case then I was interested in how much of an improvement they made.

Nicole kept playing for a bit, but when she noticed I had stopped she asked, "What's up?"

"You were going to show me how well you do with thumbs."

Her eyes opened wide, all eight of them, and she stammered as she tried to respond. I didn't quite expect this reaction, but I recognized what it was about. Luckily, Mikey had shown me the proper response.

I raised my hand in a stop gesture, "Say no more. I won't pry."

Despite her lack of real facial features, her relief was palpable. She muttered a brief "thanks" before we went back to playing the game. We made it pretty far before I decided it was time to leave; I still had a few things to prepare for tomorrow.

"Thanks for playing with me Nicole."

"Oh, no prob. I haven't been able to try those maps myself, so this was fun."

"I'll drop by when I have time to play more."

"Okay. Um, call ahead first though, sometimes I'm out in the tunnels."

“Will do.”

We bid goodbye and I headed for the manhole exit, dead bio-weapon in tow. This one was much like the last one, but definite improvements had been made to the overall design. Nothing of any real interest yet, but if the creator kept improving I hoped these would eventually be quite valuable... although I’d probably have to kill them first if the creator finally got it right. Out of curiosity I tested my slingshot design on one of the tougher portions of the bioweapon.

The results were pleasing.

I woke Saturday morning when my mask beeped, reminding me of the meet up time. There was actually plenty of time until Trebla’s plan was to be put into motion (at noon), but the high complexity of the plan required Hellion’s Henchmen to meet up hours in advance. I made sure my disguise was good and headed for the elevator.

Surprisingly there were two other powered minions on the elevator, both mutants with combat enhancements, and the elevator was somewhat crowded for it. I had talked to both before, if briefly, and we exchanged good mornings before chatting about the upcoming job. They were cautiously optimistic, as Trebla was a “big name client,” and the bonuses for a job well done would be big. Both of them were full-time minions, and “making ends meet” was important to them.

The composition of powered minions in Hellion’s Henchmen is

diverse, but could be divided into roughly three groups. Most of them were mutants, often with combat modifications that made getting a civilian job difficult, such as in Gregor's case. Then there were people with powers who, for a variety of reasons, hadn't chosen to become a villain *or* a hero. Maybe they had a previous 'record' that prevented hero work, or their power was a 'glass cannon' ability unsuited for direct combat, or they were training to eventually be a full villain, or even just they didn't care for the 'limelight'. Finally, the last group were both mutants and supers who, despite not having much actual combat power, had decided to take the risk of being a powered minion in order to get a pay increase. Buzzer was one such example: while he could manipulate sound-waves, he was not completely immune to his own power, and couldn't use it for combat without risking his own health. This last group was decidedly small, for obvious reasons.

The elevator let us off, and I headed for the cafeteria for breakfast. There were more minions about than there usually were this early in the morning, most of them drinking coffee while going over their instruction packets. I went to grab some coffee and bagels for myself.

"Tofu you bottomless pit. Leave some for the rest of us."

"Good morning Buzzer."

"Not if you drink all the coffee it won't be."

Buzzer grumbled as he made himself a cup of coffee; he appeared quite agitated. Every time he grumbled, I detected a subsonic vibration emanating from him. He did this sometimes when extremely agitated or frustrated.

"Is something wrong Buzzer? Maybe I can help." It wouldn't do to have him distracted right before the job.

“Only that I’m working on a Trebla job, which means I get to be a coordinator for this snake-knot of a plan,” he shook the packet of paper in his hand in emphasis. Indeed, his instruction packet was a lot thicker than my own.

“May I see your instructions?”

“Knock yourself out.”

He handed me the packet, and I looked it over as we took seats at a table. The reason for the thickness of the packet was readily apparent, as it included a bunch of notes on where to direct people, or what to listen for and when. I finished reading it and handed it back to Buzzer.

“See? Hurts just to look at don’t it.”

“No, but admittedly it is complex. I still want to know more about phase twenty-four through thirty-two, and I’m not getting why both Spikes and Hedge need to be present in the lobby for back-up plan three dash three B. I need to read either Spike’s, Hedge’s, or Dillo’s packet I think.”

Buzzer stopped moving. Then he very carefully set his coffee down, and opened his packet to a random page.

“Sooo… if I were to ask you what to do if… Hydrox, shows up during a four dash three A, in phase five, the answer would be?”

“I wouldn’t be there, but Kellet and Rusty would hopefully have the hydrophobic barrier up at that point. Then they should skip to their phase eleven starting positions.”

Buzzer closed his packet. “Did you memorize the whole thing just

now Tofu?"

"Yes… is that bad?"

"Hell no! Best news I've had all week! Guys! GUYS! Give your instructions to Tofu!"

There was a brief flurry of activity as Buzzer explained, and the other powered minions began handing me packets one after the other. I memorized each one before handing it back.

"Congratulations kid," said Buzzer, "You've just been promoted to co-coordinator."

Well that was good… right?

'Costume' choice is important if you work in the "cape scene," even for minions. *Especially* for minions. A costume has to serve as both functional equipment, and as an identification system to people who see it. Heroes for instance wear mostly bright colors, and their masks tend to show at least part of their face. This makes them recognizable to allies (so they don't get hit by friendly fire), villains (to draw fire away from civilians), and to civilians (so that the civilians don't panic and refuse to follow their instructions).

Minion outfits try to do the opposite. While the goal is to draw *some* attention (to draw fire away from non-powered minions), in a group the outfits blended into each other, making it harder to pick a single minion out of the crowd. A collection of dull blacks, dark grays, and

rusty browns, with only the gleaming bone-white masks to really draw attention. But still, even with a generic feel to them, the suits had small differences between them. Modifications to allow for spikes or bony plates, or just small differences in design to help identify who is who among the minions. My own suit was basically two interlocking pieces, one dull black and one dark gray, that created a distinctive swirling pattern along the limbs. Everywhere the two colors met was actually a hidden seam, and the suit would readily split along said seams to accommodate my shifting limbs. Admittedly the pattern it makes is distinctive, but in a group of powered minions it stands out no more than any of the other minions do. Versatile, durable, subtly camouflaged, and most importantly: bulletproof. My favorite feature.

I finished putting on my suit (newly repaired), and exited the locker room, heading for the garage. There I found the minions hurriedly going about their assigned tasks, lieutenants giving direction and making sure everything went smoothly. Buzzer quickly led me over to where Rattleback was talking with a masked villain I had never seen before. She wore a golden half-face mask (similar to the domino masks, but shinier, and covering more of her face), and a suit much like Sandra's, although it appeared to be somewhat more stylized. In one hand she held a 'tablet' device, and periodically tapped at it as she talked to Rattleback.

"I can assure you we will be ready to go well in advance of the stated time Ms. Lia," said Rattleback.

"As you say," replied Lia, "But may I remind you that the goal is to be neither late *nor* too early. Master Trebla's plans rely on precision."

"And we will try to be as precise as possible," said Rattleback.

"Hey Rattleback, might have found a way to help with that," interrupted Buzzer. Both Rattleback and Lia turned to us. "Tofu's been holding out on us. Got himself an eidetic memory; memorized all the plans. Mind giving him administrator privileges so he can help

me coordinate?"

"Oh? That would be helpful. I'll-"

"That wasn't in his file," said Lia, cutting Rattleback off, "It's too late to make changes to the plan now, especially with an untested variable."

"Aw come on. These instructions might as well be the complete works of Shakespeare, give me a break," complained Buzzer.

"They are *complete* instructions!" said Lia with a scowl, "And I was assured that would *not* be a problem for an organization of Hellion's Henchmen's calibre. But if you feel you are not up to the task then I believe there is still time to **cancel** our request."

Rattleback sputtered, "Wait! Wait. I'm sure we are quite up to the job-"

"Oh let em cancel, this plan is a clusterfuck anyways."

"How DARE-"

"BUZZER! SHUT UP! Ms. Lia, I'm so sorry about-"

"Variation five, on fallback plan fourteen dash seven C, requires that at least three melee combat capable minions, preferably Hedge, Dillo, and Zaps, retreat down corridor twenty-one within a time duration lasting no more than three minutes."

The three of them stopped arguing, and turned to stare at me.

"If they successfully traverse the hall in three minutes, they should retreat to the getaway vehicle parked in the easternmost alleyway next to the building, which is the optimal outcome. If they take longer, a hero, most likely Hydrox or Ferrosa, will likely be in range to damage the vehicle, and instead they should head to corridor twenty-three, where an escape tunnel was put in place that will allow

transit to the tunnel system under sector E12."

None of them moved for a bit, then Lia began tapping at her tablet.

"That section of instructions wasn't included in your packet," she finally said.

"No, it was included in the packets of Hedge, Spikes, Dillo, Gregor, and Zaps. Most likely Maz and Kellet as well, but I haven't read theirs yet."

"Mhm. Would coordinating hinder your ability to complete scenarios five, seven, and eight? Those require you to be correctly placed."

"I should be able to carry out any of the scenarios while communicating, as long as I can use the mask network… and admittedly scenario fourteen might be difficult for me if too many people require instruction at the same time." Scenario fourteen was a tricky one.

"Mhm," she tapped at her tablet some more, "Alright, I'll have a set of updated instructions for you before the departure time. I'm glad to see that *someone* can appreciate proper planning," and she glared at Buzzer before turning to Rattleback, "Rattleback, I'll send you any relevant updates, but there should be no major changes. Please plan to depart as scheduled. If you'll excuse me."

Lia walked away while tapping at her tablet, and the three of us watched her go.

"Thank you for that Tofu," said Rattleback.

Then he smacked the back of Buzzer's helmet.

Preparations continued quickly after that, despite half the minions sneaking extra peeks at their packets. I myself was already fully prepared. My suit was repaired, helmet was working fine, my core was secure inside my helmet, and my prototype slingshot was ready to use. I had even taken the time to replenish my lost supply of knives, and carve myself some ammo for the slingshot.

> Mass at 100% norm.
>
> Energy reserves = 23 cycles continued operation.
>
> All biometrics are green.

I was fully prepped and ready, but Rattleback still had one more surprise for me.

"Tofu, Zaps, Spikes, over here. Finally got those speedster MREs I told you about."

I wandered over, along with Zaps and Spikes, and Rattleback handed out two packets to each of us. The markings on them declared "U.N.A. Government Property, Commercial Resale Is Unlawful" and "Nutritional Bar: Speedster Formula" and "May Contain Peanuts." I started unclasping the mouth cover for my mask, intending to eat them.

“**Ack**! Don’t eat it all at once Tofu! Those are high-grade speedster food. Use them only when you need a pick-me-up.” said Rattleback suddenly.

“They aren’t dangerous are they?” asked Zaps.

“Worse, they’re expensive. Don’t waste them.”

I ate mine the moment Rattleback was out of eyesight. The taste was okay, but the real prize was how many calories they contained.

Energy reserves = 26 cycles continued operation.

They were PACKED with calories. Days worth of energy, and that was from just one of them. While eating the second I paid extra attention to the way the molecules were packaged. The bars had probably been produced using some kind of tinker tech, but there wasn’t anything supernormal about their materials, and I took notes with the intent to replicate the molecular storage method used. I hadn’t been paying much attention to energy storage techniques (sugar and other human foods made meticulous energy conservation unnecessary), but I wouldn’t pass up an efficient energy storage method if it just fell into my lap.

I also made a note that Spikes and Zaps needed speedster fuel. Always good to add potential weaknesses to my list of known information.

Preparations were completed shortly, and we embarked our assigned vehicles. I found myself with Buzzer, Ifrit, Olson, and surprisingly Imp, in a somewhat beaten-up looking, four-door ‘sedan’. Despite its

looks, the car hummed to life perfectly when Buzzer started it.

“You kids all strapped in?” asked Imp.

Ifrit groaned, and Imp and Buzzer both chuckled. I needed to work harder on understanding humor; I still wasn’t quite getting jokes.

The convoy of vehicles left in much the same way as the last major job; using the large elevator to reach the surface, and then splitting up as we drew closer to the target location. The bank in question was just over the sector border in E12, which explained why Trebla’s plans focused on countermeasures for E12’s and E13’s heroes the most (although there were a few mentions for heroes from NE12, SE12, SE13, and a note about a ‘nemesis’ from S10 who apparently hated Trebla a **lot**). As we drew close to the bank, Imp announced we had reached his stop and teleported out the window to a nearby rooftop. Buzzer continued on, and eventually parked the car across the street from the bank's front entrance to wait for the job to start. My helmet crackled with announcements that different minions had reached their assigned positions, and I casually observed our surroundings through the tinted windows while we waited.

The buildings around us were mostly four to five stories tall, and there was a distinct lack of the chaotic bridgework common to E13. The bank itself towered over the surrounding structures at ten stories, and was covered in large glass windows that made the building look like a giant mirror. To be honest, after the labyrinth that was E13, E12 was kind of… boring. All the buildings were near-perfect rectangles, and were evenly spaced to allow for thin roads between buildings. The only interesting feature in the architecture around us was the wide staircase in front of the bank.

The final group radioed in, and we waited for the start time *mostly* in silence. Buzzer was grumbling about our starting position, and I asked him about it.

"Bah, there's no reason for us to be in front of the bank," he said, "He just wants people to show off his 'perfect' plan to. Watch, his signal will be on the dot," and he pointed to a small clock display on the dashboard of the car. The moment the display ticked over to 12:00 a booming voice sounded over the busy street.

"**TREMBLE BEFORE TREBLA!**"

A humanoid figure suddenly fell from the sky, landing on the front steps of the bank with a **bang**. He was encased in a golden suit of armor, each movement he made reflecting rays of light in every direction. There was no helmet (which allowed me to see that he wore a trimmed goatee, and slicked back hair), but he wore a gold/silver domino mask that matched his armor, and every now and then the area around his head shimmered, suggesting some kind of barrier. The civilians all around had frozen or ducked at his loud entrance, and most were gaping in his direction or hurriedly rushing away.

He raised one hand in the direction of a parked car, and a beam of light shot from his palm, smashing into the car and causing something in it to explode. **That** got the civilians moving, and there was a lot more screaming as the crowd hurried to vacate the area.

"See? Complete show-off. Trying to impress the lowly minions," said Buzzer.

I considered Buzzer's statement…

Eh, Hellion's signal was better.

Ch27 Salad Fork

Alright. I'm starting to understand what Pebbles meant by chaotic tedium. The plan started well enough. Trebla attacked, Hellion's Henchmen stormed the building, and civilians screamed a bunch. Some of the people inside the building were then taken as hostages.

"**...WHICH IS WHY FORTRESS CITY MUST CEDE TO MY DEMANDS!**..."

But, after that phase of the plan was completed, things got a little stranger.

"**... I ALONE CAN PLAN FOR THE UNFORESEEN! WITHOUT MY GRAND VISION FORTRESS CITY WILL SUFFER CONSTANT CHAOS!**..."

It was my understanding that robbing a bank meant stealing money from it. Not making a speech on the front steps of the building. True, he was also shooting at any cop cars that showed up, but that was more a consequence of the plan rather than a part of it.

"**...FEAR NOT! FOR MY RULE WILL BE BENEVOLENT, AND JUST!**..."

Part of my uneasiness with the current state of affairs was that I hadn't known about this 'speech' part of the plan. It had been labeled

under “Trebla distracts the heroes,” but I felt it should have been labeled “Trebla attracts the heroes” instead. I didn’t understand how this helped us rob the bank. I was curious, but my requests to Lia that I be provided with a *complete* set of the plans, including Trebla’s portion, had been denied, citing security risks.

Oh well. I’m sure whatever Trebla was aiming for had to be important. Either way I had a job to perform...

[Zaps: Hey Tofu, I’m not seeing the room I’m looking for.]

[Tofu: You’re at the fifth floor intersection?]

[Zaps: ...ah. Fifth floor.]

...tedious though it may be. Did nobody read their packets? My mask had a constant stream of texts coming in from minions who were out of place. Luckily the masks had a handy little voice-to-text feature to keep the radio uncluttered.

I was in the lobby of the bank, a large chamber that took up most of the first two floors of the building. A lot of polished stone, metal, and glass went into making this room as impressive as possible. Obviously this ‘banking’ faction did quite well for itself. I sometimes wonder why architecture seems so varied among human dwellings. Some of it makes sense, such as one building serving a different purpose from another, or when a faction like the Tinker Tots makes modifications that suit them. But what about things like ‘wallpaper’, or ‘carpets’? They had so many different variations of the same thing. How did they ever choose what to use? Mikey had mentioned how bare my apartment was, so I was planning to fill it out more to match a human dwelling, but how should I pick furniture? Or decorations? I wasn’t exactly expecting many visitors, but I’d rather not worry about my den making visitors suspicious.

Maybe I could just take some of the furniture from this place? The chairs here seemed rather comfortable. I'd ask if it fit into the plan later.

I patrolled around the lobby, making a slow perimeter while I answered questions and directed the minions on other floors. Buzzer and Ifrit had gone with their own groups, so that not everyone directing was in the same spot. There were some hostages in one of the lobby alcoves, guarded by Dillo and Spikes, and Olson and Gregor were near the front window of the building keeping an eye on things. I made one more pass of the lobby before I wandered over to Olson and Gregor, to see if anything had changed outside.

"**PEOPLE ARE FALLIBLE! THEY MAKE MISTAKES AND I AM NEEDED TO CORRECT THEM! LIKE THE DRAINAGE ON THIRD AND VICTORIA! THE CONTRACTORS SCREWED IT UP!**" yelled Trebla from outside.

"Sure does like to hear himself talk," said Gregor.

"Aw come on, the guy's hilarious. Right Tofu?" asked Olson.

"Uhh…"

"Bah, you greenhorns don't know what you're talking about. This is top-shelf villainy right here," replied Olson.

"**…AND THE TRAILER FOR GHOSTBUSTERS NINE GAVE AWAY THE ENTIRE PLOT! THE WHOLE THING!**"

"…although he does seem to be running out of material. Heroes better get here soon."

“It’s been seven minutes since we started,” I supplied, “the first hero was supposed to show up at the five minute mark.”

“Ha. Never around when you need them I guess,” said Olson.

“I’ve actually been meaning to ask about that,” I said, “The plan for this robbery doesn’t just assume the heroes will show up, it seems to rely on it. I thought the point of a robbery was to get in and out before they show?”

“Ah, but see, you are assuming that money is the goal here.”

“It’s not?”

“Well not the main goal. Let me paint a picture for you. How much money do you think we can steal from here?”

I wasn’t really sure how much money the average human had. I’d never worked a regular job. If I used what I had earned so far as a baseline, and did a few calculations based on the estimated population size of this sector...

“A few million dollars?” I guessed.

“Nope, way too high. E12 and the surrounding sectors are crawling with villains and other desperate sorts, who can walk through walls, shoot lasers, etcetera, etcetera. They wouldn’t keep a lot of cash at a branch building like this. Try a few hundred thou, maybe.”

Ah, I could see the problem. “He won’t earn a profit from stealing the money.”

“Bingo.”

I had earned three thousand from the warehouse robbery job, five thousand total with the bonus they gave me. Multiplied by thirty of

Hellion's powered minions, that was a minimum of ninety thousand just to hire us. Plus he had his own minions to pay, and if anyone got arrested or injured there would be legal and medical fees.

Olson continued, "Now it's possible he could milk blood from this stone. Ransom the hostages or something. But a guy like Trebla? Nah, he's a showman. I'll bet dollars to donuts this is all part of some other scheme he's got going on. Maybe he's planting evidence against an enemy, or looking for blackmail material. Maybe he's planning to steal the entire bank company in a hostile takeover in the stock market. Maybe this is just another domino in some plan that will pay off months from now, or-"

"**GOD DAMMIT WHAT IS TAKING SO LONG! GET OUT HERE AND FACE ME!**"

"...maybe he just wants to beat up some super heroes on camera."

I doubted that was the goal. The plan called for cracking open the safes on both the basement and first floors, as well as ransacking the offices on higher floors for important files or computers. He was probably looking for important resources to use in future plans, and fighting the heroes was a means of crippling key figures for later, or something. Using such a detailed plan as just an excuse to fight heroes would be… disappointing…

"Well if he wants to fight a hero I think he's gonna get his wish," said Gregor, and he pointed outside the bank.

Walking down the street, almost casually, was a human male in a

colorful costume. His pants had a bright red, yellow, and blue pattern. His mask had a matching color scheme, and was full-face, with cutouts for his eyes, mouth, and nose. Strangely, the mask seemed to be made of a cloth material rather than something protective. While he wore no shirt, a shiny yellow cape was draped over his shoulders.

> Target recognized: Suprex, E12 hero leader, powers described as “enhanced endurance, flexibility, and strength.”
>
> Estimated threat: High.

I remembered him from when I got arrested, although I hadn’t yet seen him in action yet. Supposedly he never took off the mask, which meant he didn’t have a civilian identity. He approached Trebla, coming to a halt twenty or so feet from him before speaking.

“Señor Trebla, your reputation precedes you. Might I ask why you are causing trouble in my home on this lovely day?”

“**YOUR SECTOR HAS THE HONOR OF BEING A STEPPING STONE IN MY CONQUEST OF FORTRESS CITY!**”

Suprex laughed, then replied, “A wonderfully optimistic goal. But, I’m afraid we can’t allow that.”

A second human appeared, this one diving down from the sky behind Trebla. The shifting purple light around her identified her as Magenta, her fists extended and glowing as her forcefield concentrated around them. She must have flown over the bank itself to stay outside of Trebla’s line of sight.

She accelerated towards Trebla, no doubt intending to hit him from behind. Maybe someone managed to send a warning, or maybe Trebla had other ways of sensing her, because when she was about twenty feet away he spun and held a palm out towards her. The same energy ray he used on the car shot out, hitting Magenta full-on. Her forcefield held, but the physical force it applied to her counteracted her forward motion, and sent her careening into the side of a building across the street. Hard. She fell to the ground dazed.

Huh. Maybe this part of the plan wasn't so bad.

Suprex grimaced, then unclasped his cape before throwing it to the side (why have it if he wasn't going to use it?). Then he charged Trebla, who spun to meet him, and they began to trade blows.

I was about to signal the others to move into the next phase of the plan, when a shout rang out from behind me. I spun to witness Dillo and Spikes being thrown through the air and across the lobby, an impressive feat considering both were of the physically imposing variety of mutants. The woman who had thrown them was another I recognized from my time in E12. Easy to do since she appeared to be composed of a highly reflective metallic substance. It sort of looked as if she was a statue made of the same shiny metal that decorated the lobby. No need for a mask and armor on this one.

> Target recognized: Ferrosa, E12 hero, powers described as "enhanced endurance and strength, metallic body."
>
> Estimated threat: High.

Behind her a blur went back and forth, a hostage disappearing each

time it streaked by. That must be Turbo, bringing the number of heroes rapidly up to four. I assessed the situation in comparison to the plan, and sent out a text to Lia describing the situation. She quickly responded with a message to all the minions.

[Lia: Suprex and Magenta have engaged Trebla. Ferrosa and Turbo are confirmed in the lobby. All minions please skip ahead to phase 5, we'll be going with scenario 5B. Robo-Lemmings will be released into the lobby in two minutes.]

I was quickly inundated with messages from minions asking where to go. I answered them while I prepared myself to fight Ferrosa and Turbo. Turbo was almost finished evacuating the hostages, which was fine. They had already served their purpose as a distraction, diverting the heroes' first strike. If they were rescuing the hostages they weren't catching us in a sneak attack, and we didn't really care to harm the hostages anyways.

Best to start attacking Ferrosa before Turbo was finished though.

Dillo and Spikes were relatively unharmed from being tossed about by Ferrosa, although Spikes needed help unpinning herself from the wall she impacted. A somewhat unfortunate side-effect of her mutation, which had an assortment of spines and quills running down her back and forearms. She seemed quite irritated about getting stuck to the wall, and after Dillo pried her off, she pointed her arms at Ferrosa and, to my surprise, launched spikes from her arms! Several of the bony spines flew through the air and impacted Ferrosa, who reflexively blocked them but needn't have bothered, as they broke on her metallic skin. Spikes cursed, but kept shooting. Her projectiles didn't do much, but Dillo started to throw furniture at Ferrosa, and then Gregor and Olson joined in. I followed their lead and unstrapped the mouthpiece of my mask. Then I shifted my mouth a bit, and spat

a metal ‘slug’ at Ferrosa. It impacted her torso (and made an interesting ringing noise).

“The heck was... Tofu, what the hell is wrong with your face?” asked Olson to my side.

“Ssllien’sot” I tried to answer. I had finally figured out a compact design by using my tongue and the material in ‘bubblegum’ as the ‘band’. Just needed to hook up the flexible muscle to different parts of the jaw. Admittedly it wasn’t very good if I wanted to talk at the same time, and I was somewhat disappointed that it wasn’t strong enough to puncture Ferrosa… I wonder if Spikes would be willing to share? Her mutation looked *really* useful, if somewhat limited in ammo. The spines seemed to grow back quite fast, but she was already eating one of her MREs with one hand. Must be calorie intensive.

I tried to sidle closer to Spikes as we kept pelting Ferrosa with projectiles (maybe I could see how the spikes worked?). Surprisingly, Ferrosa hadn’t tried to move from her position and stop our barrage, and I realized she was trying to shield the hostages from any stray debris. Heroes really took this “protecting civilians” thing seriously. Ferrosa held up easily under our assault, enough that I started to wonder if I was just wasting ammo. I was just about to shift my mouth back when it became a moot point. One of the chairs Gregor had thrown suddenly blurred and flew at Olson instead, knocking him over.

Turbo was finished with the hostages.

“Oh shi-” cried Spikes, right before Ferrosa barreled into her, and sent her tumbling into Dillo. Luckily for him the armor plates that

encased his body stopped her spines from hurting him. Unfortunately for me it meant I was right next to Ferrosa. I fired a metal slug at Ferrosa point blank. It hit her in the eye and her head snapped sideways with a ringing noise.

For a moment. Then her face turned back to me, her mouth twisted into an almost-snarl. What was the correct curse word to use in this situation?... “Shit” I think. Yeah.

Shit.

Ferrosa’s punch caught me where the solar plexus would be on a human, and I went flying. Not as far as I think she expected, since I was heavier than a normal human, but enough to send me sprawling halfway across the lobby. The fight got a bit rough after that. Olson was getting absolutely pummeled by Turbo, and Gregor wasn’t nearly fast enough to help him. Ferrosa was stomping her way across the lobby towards them, only stopping long enough to kick Dillo and Spikes along the floor with her. We were swiftly being herded in. I was starting to worry we wouldn’t be able to stall the heroes long enough.

I righted myself, and extended my arms and legs into my prefered combat configuration. Then I extended whiskers out of my suit, before spitting more slugs at Ferrosa as fast as I could. She raised a hand to guard her face, and then abandoned kicking Dillo and Spikes to charge me. She was surprisingly fast considering how heavy being made of metal should make her. Still, with my legs configured for jumping and running she wasn’t able to catch up to me, and I led her on a chase around the lobby while pelting her with slugs. Even better, Spikes and Dillo managed to recover enough to go and help Olson and Gregor, and between the four of them they prevented Turbo from targeting any one of them for too long. It seemed Turbo’s

injury was still bothering him. Now we only had to hold out for twenty-three more seconds.

Which was around the time that Turbo decided to target me instead. He abandoned taking shots at the others, and attacked when my back was turned. He touched one of my whiskers and triggered a reflexive attack, my leg whipping out to try and hit him.

And missing…

"*Ohit'sthisfuckeragain!*" came Turbo's sped up voice. I was immediately assaulted by a barrage of debris picked up from all the broken furniture. While objects he threw returned to a similar speed a normal human might have thrown them at, he was able to pick up multiple objects and put them in motion before the first had finished traveling. The resulting wave of broken furniture knocked me off balance, and right into Ferrosa's range. She grabbed my arm in a vice grip, and began to punch me in the stomach. I tried to spit some slugs, but after the first she punched me in the face twice, breaking the slingshot mechanisms. The other minions tried to help, but between Turbo and Ferrosa there wasn't much they could do. Ferosa was too tough, and Turbo was too fast to hit. But! We managed to last the full two minutes.

CHECHECHECHECHE

A terrible grating noise came from one of the rooms at the back of the lobby, and out of the door poured what at first looked like a swarm of armored pack rats. They had generally the same shape as a rat, but I quickly realized that these things had no organic parts at all! They were completely mechanical, and looked to be covered in metal armor that was polished until it shown like Ferrosa. Several of

them had non-standard modifications that spat sparks, or had whirling blade attachments. These must be the Robo-Lemmings.

I was fascinated. This was the first bio-weapon implementation I had seen that was completely non-organic, and I was curious to see what they would do. I was, however, less excited at being tossed into the swarm of mechanical monsters like a fleshy projectile by Ferrosa. Admittedly I panicked at first. But after the other Robo-Lemmings didn't attack me, I pulled myself off the one Robo-Lemming I had crushed, and started putting myself back together while watching the other Robo-Lemmings all rush Ferrosa. She was strong enough to destroy them, but they used the same swarm tactics rats did, disregarding personal safety so that at least some of them would be able to reach her. Where they touched I saw sparks fly, and eventually they overwhelmed her, dragging her down and carrying her out the front of the building (breaking the floor to ceiling window as they did so). Turbo zoomed around the room, but the Robo-Lemmings covered everything, leaving no safe footing, and he was forced to retreat as well.

Cough "You guys alright?" asked Olson from his spot on the floor.

The other minions sounded off, and I gave a thumbs up since I couldn't talk yet. Gregor was the least injured among us, and despite Dillo and Spikes being kicked around by Ferrosa, it turned out Olson was actually the worst off. He had several fractured ribs and a broken leg.

"Mind helping me out Spikes?" asked Olson, and Spikes shot him in the chest and neck quickly. He reappeared unharmed, then said "Well that was fun, what's next on the agenda?"

The other minions groaned.

“Buzzer respond! I know you can hear me damnit!”

My group had retreated to one of the back halls of the lobby that led to a side entrance. It was the main congregation point for gathering the loot before we left, and minions were bringing boxes and bags out the door to waiting vans. Lia stood off to the side, yelling into her mask, and the minions gave her a wide berth. Seems not everything was going according to plan? When she saw me, she instantly abandoned trying to contact Buzzer and headed towards me.

“Tofu! Have you heard anything from Buzzer? Or the other minions who headed to the top offices?”

“Not since about three minutes ago.”

“Damnation. Alright, follow me. The rest of you to your assigned places.”

Lia led me to a door that opened into a spacious stairwell. Then she stomped up the stairs (impressive while wearing ‘high heels’) while muttering about people that couldn’t follow simple instructions.

“*Incompetent… have to do everything myself… probably broke the vibrosaw…* Tofu! You can open a steel safe correct? Your resume said

you carved through a reinforced floor."

I have a resume?

"Um, I believe so. But it might take a while if I have to be careful."

"Well you'll have about... four minutes to try, Master Trebla will be done with his fight soon. It's a small safe, imbedded into the wall of the branch manager's office. Cut the whole thing out of the wall if you think that will be quicker. Buzzer's group was *supposed* to be in and out quickly but they haven't been responding. Probably managed to damage the vibrosaw or some other such nonsense. Let this be a lesson to you, if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

We continued up the stairwell, sometimes passing minions bringing down boxes of files or computer equipment. But then as we passed the fourth floor a violent crash shook the stairwell, and a wall on the landing ahead of us caved in as a humanoid shape in golden armor flew through it, embedding itself in the opposite wall.

"Master Trebla!" yelled Lia as she rushed up the stairs, stumbling a bit due to the pieces of rubble that had scattered about. I decided to follow her up when no heroes appeared through the hole in the building.

"**Mrph**, is that you Lia?" came Trebla's muffled voice. He slowly pulled himself out of the hole and brushed off his armor (which had held up remarkably well considering), then he spat out a tooth. "Perfect timing. Pencil in a meeting with my usual dentist please, and

make a note: Suprex's power is more than just physical enhancements. Managed to punch past a Gentis MK3 reactor forcefield. *Past* mind you, not through. Should be impossible… some kind of second dimensional shortcut? Or maybe a mental ignorance erasure...how would one counter that… and… wait. Shouldn't you be overseeing the vans right now?"

"I-I'm so sorry sir! There was a slight hiccup with the tenth floor office safe. I-I wouldn't have left my post except the assigned minions have stopped answering, b-but no worries! Tofu here can open the safe, we'll be right on track, n-no d-delays expected."

"Tofu? Ah, yes! The lad who faked his death while fighting Magenta. Absolutely brilliant performance young man. Top marks on acting and dramatic tension, and I was told it was all ad libbed on your part? Never could get the hang of it myself. Glad to see you've changed your outfit as well, 'street thug with bullet-proof jacket' isn't very thematic, although I will admit it helped sell the 'hero assaults impoverished minion' angle. Next time might I suggest-"

His next words were cut off as a lamppost rocketed through the hole in the building. Lia and I both ducked in alarm, but Trebla stepped forward and managed to catch the missile head on! His suit whirred as whatever devices it contained strained to halt the force of the projectile, and he threw it to the side a moment later.

"Excuse me for a second, seems Suprex is getting impatient. Definitely some physics nonsense happening here. He can't fly and we're on the fifth floor; the angle doesn't make any sense. Two dimensional shortcut, it has to be…"

Trebla walked to the hole in the building. Then he looked around as

if searching for something before firing three blasts of his laser down into the streets.

“That ought to keep him busy for a moment. Now then Lia, you said the team that went to the top floor are having difficulties? What did they say the problem was?”

“Um, w-well I’m not exactly sure. They haven’t been responding.”

“Not a simple mishap then, if they’ve gone silent they ran into trouble. How odd, most of the heroes in response range are below. Brick patrols too far out to make it in time, and he’s not exactly subtle... Hydrox should be putting out that warehouse fire on E12’s south end… A vigilante? No, too many heroes about, they wouldn’t risk it… Who else is close enough too… Ah!”

Trebla suddenly smiled, fully and broadly, the bloody gap from the missing tooth making him look rather…

Manic.

“**I HAVE IT!** Oh this will be just splendid! Lia! Scenario fourteen B. Send young Tofu here. And Ifrit! There was two of them when I read the report, it needs to be matched! And get footage! I don’t care how. Tofu! The safe contents are secondary, instead attempt to kidnap the branch manager, they might not bite otherwise. But don’t kill anyone! Now’s not the time for that. Lia! We’ll go with a modified five dash seven B. Get the minions moving, don’t wait for me. If I get arrested go with extraction plan thirty-seven or thirty-nine, I’ll let you decide. Tofu! I’ll be able to buy you fifteen to twenty five minutes, but as I said ad lib isn’t my specialty. Ifrit should be on the sixth floor. Use escape tunnel two when you're done, the vans won’t be able to wait. Now go! GO! Everyone to your places! Oh I do so love a good debut! I’ll have to reorganize my schedule for...”

Trebla continued to talk for a bit, mostly to himself I think. Lia and I had already taken off in seperate directions to implement his orders. I just wish I understood the purpose here. This was a risky modification to the plan, and a lot of things could potentially go wrong.

At least I now had a firm grasp of chaotic tedium.

Ch28 Double Danger Dinner Date

“What’s scenario fourteen B?” asked Ifrit.

“I’m not sure, it wasn’t in the packet, and he didn’t explain. Scenario fourteen is ‘an encounter with an unknown superhero’ though, so I think fourteen B must be similar. At least he mentioned there would be two of ‘them’, so I guess we will encounter two people.”

“Makes sense. It’s a very Trebla thing to do.”

“How so?”

“Trebla likes dramatic fights, and he likes them to be fair.”

“But doesn’t that reduce our chances of successfully kidnapping the branch manager?”

“I doubt he really cares about that. Trebla doesn’t commit crime to earn money Tofu. He gets money to commit villainy.”

Illogical.

Ifrit and I were running up the stairs to the tenth floor, and we were discussing how to handle the situation. The original plan had called for Buzzer, Pebbles, and Maz to clear out the safe in the branch manager’s office, and move any of the bank employees to the first floor with the other hostages. A few minutes after Trebla’s fight started outside the bank, Buzzer’s communications had gone silent. Only a few minions had gone to the top three floors, and they hadn’t needed as much direction from Buzzer, so the problem had gone unnoticed at first. Normally a minion disappearing without a trace was a big deal, as there were many different (and dangerous) ways that something could go wrong, such as mutant animals, or vigilantes. Our plan was to go in as stealthily as possible, with me

scouting ahead and Ifrit guarding our rear. I was apprehensive, but we had received a message from Lia that the cameras were set up, and at the very least there wasn't a giant triggered monster waiting for us.

Requests to use the cameras ourselves were, discouragingly, ignored.

The stairwell outside of the tenth floor was empty, with no sign of Maz who should have been on lookout. I shifted my arm and leg joints to a better position, and slowly crawled through the door leading into the office space, keeping my body in a lower, harder to hit profile. The stairwell opened into the corner intersection of two hallways, and I confirmed both were clear before moving down the left one that led to the branch manager's office. Ifrit followed behind me and covered the intersection, while I checked the first two doors (small empty offices). Then the hall turned, leading deeper into the building, and I extended a small eye tendril around the corner.

[Tofu: Contact. At the end of this hall it opens up and there is a desk. There's an organism on the desk: green, thin body that splits at multiple points, each split has a flat green blade extended from it. Is this something heroes use? Some kind of sentry?]

[Ifrit: It might be a part of someone's power, but I don't recognize that one. How big is it? Any other features?]

[Tofu: About two feet tall, limb blades look like they have a reach of a foot and a half, and it's sitting in a ceramic bowl, not moving.]

[Ifrit: Wait, ceramic bowl?]

She moved up the hallway and quickly looked around the corner. Then she smacked my shoulder.

[Ifrit: Tofu, stop fooling around.]

[Tofu: What? Do you know what it is?]

[Ifrit: Seriously?]

[Tofu: I've never seen one before...]

[Ifrit: ...it's a potted plant.]

[Tofu: Is it dangerous?]

[Ifrit: What? No! Of course not.]

[Tofu: Are you sure?]

[Ifrit: Just go!]

I moved down the hallway and checked the room. It was a lot like the room where Lily worked, with the one desk and only one chair behind it. Then I briefly poked at the potted plant. It was feeble, and what I had thought were blades weren't even sharp. This was where fruit came from? I had expected more…thorns, fast acting acids, something to kill prey with and justify the expense of costly fruit lures. But this one just sort of sat there, embedded in some soft dirt, not moving. Did it have no survival instincts whatsoever? Or maybe it was just feigning innocuousness. I gave it space, and decided to do more in-depth research on plants later. I… may have been too distracted by fruit the last time, and missed a few small details.

The room had two doors on either side of the desk. I moved to the right one, before cracking it open slowly and quietly. It opened into a wide open 'conference' room, with a long, solid, rectangular (of course) table, around which many padded chairs were placed. There were two doors on the right wall, three on the longer back wall, and the room extended all the way to the side of the building, where a

floor to ceiling window made up the entire left wall of the room. It was in front of this window that two figures stood, looking out into the streets and talking quietly.

[Tofu: Contact. Two people facing the window. One is wearing what looks like a white biker suit and helmet, with multicolor piping along the suit seams, and is about our height. The other's costume looks like gray police armor, except the arms and legs have been removed, and no shoes. About five-foot-ten if I'm measuring right. Both of them have white armbands with the Fortress City emblem on them, does that mean something?]

[Ifrit: That means they're sidekicks, but I don't recognize them, they must be new.]

[Tofu: How dangerous are they?]

[Ifrit: They shouldn't be. Central wouldn't let them out in the field unless they could control their powers around civilians. They'll have had that drilled into them.]

[Tofu: So they've received training.]

[Ifrit: Anywhere from a week to a month. But if they just got clearance for field work we've got more experience than them, I guarantee it.]

[Tofu: I see. In that case I think I can sneak up on them and stab them.]

[Ifrit: Tofu, you can't just kill them.]

[Tofu: Don't worry, Trebla already told me not to. I'll just stab their spines so they can't fight.]

[Ifrit: That's not any better! Look, let's just try to find the branch manager like Trebla wanted. We take them hostage and the sidekicks won't be able to do anything.]

Ah, that was a good idea. Engaging two unknown powersets wasn't really something I wanted to do anyways.

[Tofu: Alright. I'll try to find the manager.]

I extended an eye tendril farther into the room to get a better angle. The large table and thick padded chairs blocked most of my vision from my spot near the floor, but as far as I could tell the sidekicks were the only people in the room. It was likely the manager was in one of the five rooms attached to this one, the blueprints for the building had them labeled as offices.

I slipped through the door and quickly ducked behind the end of the table, being careful to be as quiet as possible while I did so. The first door was on the right wall, and I slipped an eye tendril under quickly. It was dark, and I didn't see more than a desk and chairs. From my experience humans rarely stood in unlit rooms, so I tried the next one, but unfortunately it was also dark and empty. Sigh. That meant the only other rooms to check were on the back wall. The table wouldn't give me good cover at that angle, if they looked back they'd see me.

I decided to crawl under the table and get as close as possible to the doors before leaving cover, but as I drew closer, I discovered another objective that had been obscured by all the padded chairs.

[Tofu: I've found the missing minions. Buzzer, Pebbles, and Maz are leaned up against the back wall of the room, between the middle and far left door. They all have their wrists and ankles restrained with handcuffs, but I don't see any injuries.]

[Ifrit: Can you free them?]

[Tofu: I'll try.]

I made my way towards them under the table. When I was close enough, I checked to make sure the sidekicks hadn't noticed me, then I moved forward to help the the other minions escape. Immediately I knew something else was wrong.

[Tofu: Hey Ifrit? I think they've been incapacitated somehow. None of them are moving.]

[Ifrit: Even Pebbles?]

[Tofu: Yes.]

Which was worrisome. Pebbles was supposedly resistant to getting knocked unconscious. Maybe they were affected by a power?

[Ifrit: Damnit. Um… do you think you can carry them out without the sidekicks noticing?]

[Tofu: Pebbles is too bulky, but maybe Buzzer or Maz? It's kinda risky though. Didn't you say we should get the branch manager first?]

[Ifrit: Well yeah, but, I mean, there's no guarantee we find them, a-and Maz has kids waiting at home!]

[Tofu: How is that relevant?]

[Ifrit: Look just, just get Maz! If they notice I'll throw a fireball at them. Trebla wants us to fight them anyways.]

[Tofu: But-]

[Ifrit: Just grab her!]

[Tofu: Alright, alright.]

I didn't really agree with this change of plans, but she had a point in that we weren't guaranteed to find a hostage we could use. It was indeed possible that they had already been evacuated after all. I started to shift a few limbs around, when suddenly I heard a voice in the room. I was startled for a second, but it was just the sidekicks talking to each other again.

"What happens if Trebla wins? Do we, like, go down there?" asked the one with the cut-off arm and leg coverings. It was male, and sounded young.

"He won't. What's wrong Morph, you scared?" replied the other, a female, also young. Both of them might have been around Ifrit or Mikey's age.

"Kinda, he's been fighting multiple heroes without breaking a sweat. Don't know about you, but I only finished training like a week ago."

"He's a complete clown. They won't lose."

"If you say so Poena."

Hm, so they were definitely new then. Hopefully that would work in our favor.

I made sure the sidekicks were still watching the fight outside, then slunk over to Maz. I moved very slowly to avoid making a sound, and very carefully slipped an arm under her so I could transfer her to my back. A few tendrils to secure her, and I was on my way back under the table. It was a good thing that Maz was on the smaller side of the human spectrum, and that her mutation hadn't caused her to develop

any bony protrusions, or other features that might snag or clunk against the table and chairs. In fact, the only way you could tell she was a mutant while in costume was the brown scales that covered her hands. Maybe she was related to the twin mutant kids from back in my apartment building? The scales matched at least.

I reached the door without complications, and shuttled Maz through to the other side. Ifrit took her, and proceeded to try and wake her. Maz groaned softly, which was encouraging, but didn't wake up. I removed the cuffs on her legs so she could walk if she woke, but left the handcuffs (easier to carry if she didn't). Sneaking a peek through the cracked door revealed the sidekicks hadn't moved from their spot at the window, so I slipped back out and under the table.

[Tofu: That was easier than I anticipated. It might be possible to get the other two within the time constraints.]

[Ifrit: Do it.]

I moved back to Buzzer and Pebbles. Pebbles would have to be last, he wasn't exactly bulky, but he was **solid**. I'd need to-

Click

The leftmost door on the back wall, the one closest to the window and sidekicks, swung inward, and a woman in a business suit stepped out.

The branch manager.

“Excuse me, but has there been any update on...”

The sidekicks looked over to her, the manager looked over to me, and I made a snap decision. Muscles in my legs tensed, and I leapt, extending my arms towards the manager as I did so. If I could take her hostage-

Bam

I was shoved into the wall, by the extended arms of Morph! Both his arms and legs had stretched in order to reach me in time. In the next moment his left arm wrapped around both of mine like a tentacle, and his right hand grew in size before making a fist and smashing into my torso. The manager screamed and retreated back into the office, slamming the door behind her.

Morph was a shapeshifter! I kicked at his leg with my own. Instantly his leg hardened into what looked like rock, and it felt like I kicked a wall. Okay. So he could change size, shape, and composition of his limbs near instantaneously.

Jealousy.

I grabbed his hardened leg with my foot, sinking traction claws into the stone-like material. Then I kicked my other foot into his torso, and latched onto his body armor. Suddenly he was supporting my weight entirely by himself, and I pulled him off his feet. Skill and technique were quickly discarded as we rolled on the floor in a

chaotic jumble of limbs, both of us trying to overpower the other with sheer brute force. I began cycling blood, and flooded my muscles with micro units that set about bolstering and reinforcing. Slowly but surely I began to pull ahead.

“Poena! Stab him!” Morph suddenly yelled.

Poena activated her power. Two red spikes, about a foot and a half long, formed in her hands, and she gripped them like knives. They glowed. Like the late Frankie’s vaporizing blades.

[Tofu: Ifrit, I believe I require backup.]

She didn’t respond, but she didn't need to. A gout of flame materialized in front of Poena, separating her from where I wrestled with Morph. Ifrit had her hand in front of her, and was using it like a flamethrower.

[Tofu: Ifrit, you need to work on your aim.]

It’s not like Poena would die from a little fire.

[Ifrit: I’m handling it! Just win already!]

Easy to say, not so much to do. Morph had transformed his arms and legs into a semi-metallic substance, and they were a lot harder to push back now. Strangely, the transformation didn’t encompass his

head or torso, so I spat a knife at Morph's face (I was out of slugs), and the knife embedded itself in his helmet. Oops. I hadn't expected it to go so deep; I needed to readjust from shooting at Ferrosa. Luckily it seemed the helmet was pretty sturdy.

"Poena! POENA!" yelled Morph.

"I'm trying! Shut up!"

Poena suddenly flung her spikes at Ifrit, making her duck, and then she charged Morph and I. This time an orange pole materialized in her hands, and she swung it at my back. It struck a hard blow, but I was immensely relieved when the pole didn't vaporize through me.

It hurt though. It hurt a LOT. She rained more blows down on me, and each seemed to magnify the pain.

No damage detected.

I was confused for a moment. I felt the pain, but there was no injury? I tried turning off my pain receptors, but the next few strikes still hurt. It was like the pain was being transmitted right to my brain. How odd. But if it wasn't a real injury, there was nothing to worry about.

I was just about to ignore her when her power changed again. The orange pole disintegrated, and reformed into a yellow blade that she held in both hands. I did *not* want to see what that would do, but Morph had changed tactics from trying to overpower me to just restraining me. Poena lifted the blade up!...

BANG

...and was blown sideways into the wall as one of Ifrit's fireballs detonated near her. Morph and I were buffeted by the explosion, but Morph was most distracted by it, reflexively shielding his head with his arms.

I took my chance, and disengaged from Morph to lunge at Poena. She was still stunned from the blast, and I was able to grab her arms before she could materialize a new weapon. I made sure to hold her hands well away from the rest of me.

"GET OFF! GET OFF ME YOU FREAK!"

A knife at her throat got her to settle down, and Morph didn't seem to have any other tricks. He was on the floor while Ifrit kept her arm trained on him.

I transfered Poena's wrists to one hand, and reached for the doorknob to the room where the manager was hiding. It was of course locked.

"We want the contents of the safe!" I yelled through the door. "Give it to us and no one gets hurt!"

...

Hmm, no response. I drew back my fist, intending to smash the door open.

And a green pole materialized with two sharpened ends, one end stabbing into the hand I held Poena with, and the other end extending all the way to Ifrit, stabbing her through the chest. Ifrit *screamed*, her raspy voice unable to hit the octaves of a normal human, but somehow all the worse for it. Her body spasmed as she lost voluntary control, and the arm she had aimed at Morph twitched, launching a fireball. It luckily didn't hit Morph, but it landed just beyond him and exploded in a violent, uncontrolled explosion. I hadn't known she could make them that strong.

Morph tried to shield himself by shifting his limbs, but the blast was right next to him, and it sent him flying back in our direction, literally launching him *over* us.

And towards the floor-to-ceiling window.

He hit the glass wall, and it easily shattered. Could he survive a fall from this height? Doubtful. Even with his power. Which was why I had latched onto him with one arm as he flew past. He was heavy, and I nearly lost my grip, but with traction claws sunk into the carpet, and my free hand grabbing onto the concrete lip of the window, I was able to arrest his movement. Sure he swung down into the side of the building with a **crunch**, but at least it wasn't ten stories to the pavement, and besides, he was wearing a helmet. No lethal injuries here.

I took a few moments to adjust to the precarious position, then got my limbs in order and pulled him up. It seemed he had been knocked unconscious by the blast, and his nose and one ear were bleeding, but

I didn't see any life-threatening injuries. I placed him down and checked to make sure his heartbeat was stable, before turning to look for Ifr-

Thok

Pain

The tip of a bladed pole extended from my torso. This one had vicious looking barbs along the length of the blade, and it was a deep violet color. Almost black. It hurt, even with no physical injury it hurt. I tried to ignore it. It hurt. I tried to shut off the pain receptors. It hurt. I tried to *destroy* the pain receptors. It **hurt**. Had I thought I knew pain? I was naive. This wasn't a stimulated nerve. It was in my head. In my **mind**. Inescapable.

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.It hurt.It hurt.It hurt.It hurt.It hurt.**It hurt.It hurt.*It hurt.It hurt.It hurt.…***

Human.exe has crashed.

Recovery time: indeterminate.

Calculating…

Switching to priority targeting.

Everything was still for a moment.

Primary objective: eliminate hostile combatants.

!Exception: non-lethal removal.

The shapeshifting Hellion's Henchmen minion moved suddenly, an arm striking out like a snake and grabbing a startled Poena around her neck. She had thought the minion was unconscious on his feet, it almost always happened that way when she used this aspect of her power, but apparently he was unaffected. She tried to move the spear, tried to pull it and force the barbed blade back through him, but he simply lifted her up and slammed her into the floor, knocking the wind from her. From there she blacked out quickly, her lungs empty, with no fresh supply of oxygen coming. Only when her power deactivated did the minion finally drop her.

All hostiles disabled: proceeding to next objective.

It moved to the office door and kicked.

Crunch

The door was destroyed, ripped off its hinges, and the minion moved into the office and scanned the area. Then it moved to the only desk and upended it, revealing three humans hiding underneath. They screamed, or stared at the minion with wide eyes and mouths gaping. It crouched down to meet the one identified as the branch manager

eye-to-eye.

“The safe.”

I was already in the escape tunnel when I finally got Human.exe running again. Ifrit was slung over my shoulder, and I was supporting Maz as she walked unsteadily. I had met up with her after leaving the conference room. She had regained consciousness while I retrieved the contents of the safe, and the branch manager. Then she had had to convince me to not drag along the branch manager as a hostage. Now that I could think properly again, it was obvious that Trebla didn’t really care about kidnapping her. But in my diminished state, I had simply been focused on following Trebla’s plan, and retrieving important objectives such as Hellion’s offspring (I didn’t want to be barbeque).

We walked down the dim tunnel. It had been attached to the bottom of an elevator shaft by Trebla’s minions days in advance. I had never been to E12’s tunnel system before, but the minion’s had clearly marked the directions, and even sealed most of the side tunnels, so I wasn’t expecting any monsters or rats. Though, it was still a surprise when we rounded a corner and Trebla was waiting for us. His armor was severely damaged, and he had a black eye in addition to other scrapes and bruises.

“Ah! There you are lad. Was beginning to wonder if you would make it. How did it go? Didn’t get roughed up too badly I hope?”

“We were ‘roughed up’ quite a bit, but we obtained our objectives.”

“Wonderful! Splendid work. I can hardly wait to get back and see the footage, reception is terrible down here. I’m thinking of calling it-”

“Here are the safe contents,” I interrupted, and handed him the folders of documents.

“Oh of course, thank you.”

He took the folders and ruffled through the documents in silence as we walked along, every now and then murmuring to himself.

“Was it what you were looking for?” I asked.

“Hm? What’s that?”

“The documents.”

“Oh, I wasn’t looking for anything in particular. Today’s outing was more about assessing the strength of the E12 hero team. They’ve had several deaths and replacements recently. The Espada really were an unpleasant lot, not an ounce of decorum among them.”

“If that was the main objective why rob the bank? Or hire so many minions? Wouldn't attacking them directly be more efficient?”

“Tut tut Tofu. That just wouldn’t do. For proper villainy one needs style, flair, chutzpah!”

“Why?”

“Ha, why he says. Because otherwise I’m just a criminal, a common lawbreaker, a thug in a mask.”

“And that’s bad?”

“No, but that is not what I aspire to Tofu. Choosing the path of ill repute to survive is one thing, but I don’t want to just survive. I want

to thrive, I want to climb ever higher, I want to **live**! It's important to know the difference."

Illogical: surviving = = living.

"I don't understand."

"Oh give it time, you're young. Stick with this business long enough, and I guarantee you'll understand eventually. In fact, I believe you're well on your way. Why else would you have stolen that potted plant?"

Huh. I glanced at the plant nestled in the crook of my arm. It had been on my list of objectives, and while it wasn't very important, grabbing it as I left hadn't presented any real risk to my survival. Just another calculation as I operated without Human.exe. Entirely logical, despite what Trebla might think.

"Um, not to interrupt," said Maz, "but shouldn't we have caught up to Buzzer and Pebbles by now?"

Trebla looked at her in confusion. "I finished my fight rather early, I doubt they got here ahead of me. Tofu, did you see where they went?"

…

…

...oops.

Hellion was in her office, going over a stack of papers that had to be approved and signed. With her right hand she pulled a paper off the stack, read it, signed it, and then placed it into a second stack of completed papers. With her left hand, she tapped.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Her fingers tapped out the steady beat on the wooden desk. Where her fingers hit the desk were many blackened marks in the wood, caused by her power when she lapsed in control. Whatever had possessed her to get a wooden desk this time around? She'd wind up having to replace it before the bi-annual base move for sure.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The fingers of her right hand began to smoke, and she dropped the pen before she could inadvertently set the important business papers on fire. Smoke (the man) collected the papers and set them safely aside for her, they both knew she wouldn't get anything else done for now. Normally her control was pretty good, almost two decades of practice would do that, but today her nerves were on edge, and it was her own fault.

"Why did I ever agree to stay out of things?" she asked the room.

Smoke, of course, did not answer. It was a rhetorical question

anyways.

Hellion's eyes drifted over to a small metal locket hanging from a stand on her desk. There weren't any pictures inside it (far too risky to leave those lying around), but there was an engraving that read: "To my favorite mom, from your favorite little cinder." They grew up so damn fast. First they were running around the house getting scorch marks on everything, then they were suddenly perpetrating their first bank heist, and worrying their parents of course. Such was the cost of being a super villain with a family, Hellion supposed. She was proud as could be that her daughter had taken an interest in her career path, but sometimes she wished Cindy had decided on something just a bit safer. Like bomb-defuser, or monster wrangler. Hellion had at first tried to watch over her daughter to make sure she was safe, but had wound up being somewhat of a helicopter parent, and it had resulted in one of the very rare fights with her daughter. The wall they damaged still needed to be repaired come to think of it. Since then, she had left Cindy's training in the hands of her minions, albeit her most trusted and competent. Now that Cindy was eighteen she was stepping into the real jobs, and she had made it absolutely clear that if she hadn't tolerated her mother's oversight before, she *definitely* wouldn't tolerate it now that she would be working with her fellow minions and peers. Hellion wanted to respect her daughter's wishes, but damned if it wasn't hard some days.

Hellion grabbed a small remote on her desk and turned on the television attached to the wall; maybe she could distract herself with the news? No such luck, the main story on right now was of course the Trebla heist. A reporter was standing in front of the robbed bank, giving an account of what had happened (heavily edited to favor the heroes of course). Hellion already knew most of the major details; Trebla's minion Lia was always quite prompt with reports. Now she just had to wait for Imp and the minions to get back. She hated this part, that anxious little spark in your stomach as you waited to see who came back, who had been pinched… or who had died. It was for that exact reason that Hellion had preferred to be as hands-on as possible in her early days. But, now she had a company to run, and as

much as it chafed, she had long ago learned that trying to run a successful supervillainous organization from both the top *and* bottom was more trouble than it was worth.

Damnit was there really nothing on? Hellion rapidly switched from channel to channel. They were two weeks into Odd Summer, and E13 was entirely too quiet. There was the weird flaming cars, but those weren't even much of a nuisance; they didn't crash or hit anyone. Practically better drivers than real people. The Espada hadn't caused any more trouble either. What were the odds that wasn't an ominous sign? Hell, even the pack rat swarms were being relatively docile. Hellion usually had to send a team or two in to help clear out the sewers, but it hadn't been necessary so far. She hated the calm. If things were calm it usually just meant that trouble was brewing under the surface, and would come back to bite her later.

The elevator **dinged**, signifying someone was on their way down.

"Finally!" exclaimed Hellion, turning off the news and dropping the remote on her desk with a clatter. The elevator **dinged** again, and opened to reveal Imp.

"Hey there boss. Hope you're in the mood for some good news," said Imp, stepping off the elevator. He grabbed a seat at her desk.

"Always. I take it things went well?"

"Like you wouldn't believe, boss. *Jasper's info was right. One hundred percent.*"

Hellion felt her breath catch. Jasper had come back from his trip to Central with more than just the info she requested. He had come back

with tall tales about one of Central's most closely guarded secrets. She hadn't dared to hope, but if Jasper was right, it was a prize too tempting to resist.

"*You're kidding.*"

"Nope. Seems Jasper really hit the jackpot this time. Lia sent me what I needed from the bank, and I planted everything where Trebla directed. A few more tweaks and we'll be ready to roll when the time comes."

"And no one saw you? No one suspects? Do you think anyone will figure us out?"

"As far as I know I was in and out clean. Trebla had all eyes on him. It's possible someone might find what I planted, but I doubt they'll know what it means. Besides, no one looks for what they've *gained* after a bank heist."

"Well, knock on wood."

But she was grinning, and while she discussed details, and hammered out preliminary plans, her excitement grew. That spark of exhilaration that let her know she was alive. Sure, a thriving business and blooming daughter did that as well. Of course they did.

But sometimes? Sometimes you just had to engage in a little supervillainy.

Ch29 Brewing

> Deleting memory #4f75636874686174687572 74 data.sense;
>
> Restarting Human.exe;

…

Yup, that felt better.

Poena's power is truly unpleasant. It somehow caused pain to the human 'psyche' directly, bypassing the physical medium entirely as long as she fulfilled the requirement of hitting her opponent (I had to look up the word psyche. Humans have a word for everything). The result was that it caused damage to the mind while leaving the physical body intact. Still, an injury was an injury. A search on the internet for "pain damages human mind?" pulled up all sorts of results, the most notable of which was something called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I had no idea how one healed that, so I decided to play it safe, and just deleted the sensory data from the memory.

As for countering Poena's power in the future… difficult. The early stages of her power hadn't bothered me overmuch, but the last one had crashed Human.exe. Ifrit had been knocked out by the green 'javelin' Poena materialized, and Buzzer, Maz, and even Pebbles had all been knocked out by her power as well according to Maz. That meant Poena's power had a very high success rate, so I would need to be aware that she could theoretically remove targets from a critical scenario at will, and for an extended period of time. Even now, Ifrit

and Maz slumped against the walls of the elevator we were riding in for support, not completely recovered.

Normally I would just remove Poena, but both Ifrit and Trebla had warned me against killing or even permanently damaging the sidekicks. Maybe it was because they were young? Humans of all factions seemed to get overly defensive of offspring. Or maybe it was just the sidekick status; I'd need to ask Sandra what the 'unwritten rules' were concerning them. I didn't like having someone around who could disable Human.exe, but it looked like I would just need to work around Poena for now...

… unless she had an "accident" in the near future. The sidekicks definitely weren't as experienced as the heroes; mistakes happened, our fight with the sidekicks was proof of that. One more inexperienced mistake at a critical moment, and our fight could have easily turned deadly. It was practically more dangerous than a fight with a hero. I hadn't appreciated the effort heroes put into not critically injuring people during a fight. Things like shoving instead of outright hitting, or aiming for armored or muscled areas when they could have easily smashed a temple or other critical weak point. Removing Poena would have to be carefully done; I didn't want to escalate confrontations with the heroes any farther.

And maybe I should stop aiming at their eyes so often. They didn't seem to like that.

As for the other sidekick Morph… not a major threat like Poena potentially was, despite his instantaneous shifting... that worked with no regard for chemistry… or physics. His combat designs had been sloppy and amateurish as well, so he obviously hadn't done very well in whatever "training" he'd completed. If I had his shifter power I

could use it seventy-two... no, eighty-nine percent more efficiently than he could. Shifting his skin into stone, and *metal*! What, he couldn't use chitin like any sensible organism? Probably just showing off. I doubted he even knew how to align his nucleotides for rapid mitosis. A medium-level threat, at best.

...Maybe he should have an accident too.

Cough "By the way, thanks for grabbing me back there you two," said Maz, breaking the silence in the elevator.

"Oh, no worries Maz, no problem at all," replied Ifrit.

"Yes it was. It was tactically unsound… Ifrit you're stepping on my foot."

Maz laughed, "Well thank you anyways Tofu. I have little ones at home, and I hate leaving them with my nan."

"Yes, that was why Ifrit wanted to retrieve you… Ifrit my foot."

"Aww, did she now? Thank you sweetheart, I owe you both one."

Oh right! She owes me lunch now!

"Um, it's fine Maz. Just part of the job," said Ifrit, "How are the twins doing lately anyways?"

Aww, it's part of the job? Oh well...

Ifrit and Maz talked about the twins for a bit. Maz was indeed the 'mother' of the two twin mutants I met at the apartment. I found this curious, as all three of them had the same mutation of brown scales. Searching on my phone for "Can humans have the same mutation?" and "Offspring have similar mutations?" brought up a lot of conflicting results. Some claimed that once mutavus affected someone it was easier for the virus to transfer to family members, citing the 'Donnar Family' case. Others said that similar mutations came about only from similar injuries, and that similarities were superficial, but there was evidence both for and against that theory. Frustrating. Humans had good records of other subjects, but the moment it came to mutavus information became muddled. I decided to just ask Maz.

"Maz, I have a question."

"What's up?"

"I wanted to ask how you and your kids have the same mutation? Did you all have a similar injury?"

"Tofu!" said Ifrit, while stepping on my foot again.

Oops. I guess this was another 'rude' topic? I really didn't understand why humans were so testy about mutations. Pebbles wasn't at least.

"Oh. Sorry Maz."

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm not offended by questions as long as you're polite. As for your answer I was already mutated when I became pregnant with the twins, they inherited it from me."

"Ah, I didn't know mutavus could do that."

"I didn't either. Only found out after they were born, imagine my surprise!"

We talked a bit more, mostly Maz about her kids, and I learned a bit more about 'family' dynamics. It was interesting stuff; apparently the twins could be "right little terrors," and they made her "want to kill them sometimes," but she hadn't yet. Seems being a 'parent' required good self-restraint.

Our conversation was cut short when the elevator finally reached its destination. It had been a longer than normal trip since this elevator started all the way over at the E12/E13 border. The doors dinged and opened.

"**Baby**!"

Suddenly a human woman in red armor dashed in and grabbed Ifrit, crushing her in a hug. I almost attacked before I recognized her as Hellion.

"*Oh my god I was so worried!* Are you hurt? Are you okay? Lia sent the video over, and I saw you get **stabbed**, and I lit my desk on fire, but Trebla said you were fine, and-"

"*Omigod,* MOM**!** Let me go! I'm *fine*!"

Huh. I'd never been this close to my boss before. Small sparks and tongues of flame were coming off her suit in her agitation, and Maz and I edged around the two of them to leave the elevator. Imp and a few others were in the hall, and we joined the forming crowd of curious onlookers.

“That little **bitch** hurting my girl. I should pop over and give whatever her name is a piece of my mind!”

“*Omigod please stop embarrassing me!*” said Ifrit, as she tried to extricate herself from Hellion.

“The sidekick’s name was Poena,” I supplied helpfully.

“Her name will be **charcoal** when I’m done with her!” declared Hellion.

“**MOM**!”

I decided to slink away while everyone was distracted with Hellion’s display. It was an interesting example of family interaction, but it seemed rather troublesome, and even a little dangerous with how the sparks and embers were coming off of Hellion (barbecues...). These ‘families’ seemed rather beneficial if it meant someone like Hellion would retaliate for you, but at the same time somewhat... scary. I’m glad I wasn’t part of one.

Now, I just had to leave before anyone questioned my performance on this job. I didn’t want to have to explain why I left Pebbles and Buzzer behind to Hellion, or worse, to Sandra.

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

“Oh, um, hi Adder.”

I hadn’t noticed her among the minions. She walked up to me and poked me in the chest.

“What the heck was that?”

“Um, what was what?”

“Lia sent us the early footage of the sidekicks to look over. Couldn’t help but notice the terrible *lack* of my training you applied to fighting Morph.”

“But he had a power…” (and Ifrit said I couldn’t just stab him).

“So? And that chokehold was pathetic! Poena got up in less than a minute.”

“Well I…” (was sort of malfunctioning at the time).

“Follow me. Obviously I need to teach you a proper sleeper hold.”

“But I was-” (going to do tests with the plant).

“Excuses excuses.”

“But-”

“March!”

Heroes

The conference room for the E13 Hero Department wasn’t exactly “nice” as conference rooms went, but it was practical. The chairs were reinforced, the large table was holding up nicely (despite the many dents in its metallic surface), and a large flat screen t.v. hung on the wall. Normally the t.v. might be displaying the news, but currently it was displaying a video of the fight against Trebla outside the bank. Unlike the usual shaky cell phone or news cam footage Brick was used to watching after a fight, *this* video was cut together

using crisp, high-resolution footage, and edited together by someone with obvious talent for choreographing dramatic action sequences. The result was a thirty-five minute long montage of the villain Trebla holding off four heroes and then dramatically escaping, which the villain had then posted to his *goddamn blog*.

Brick sighed and turned towards the six other people in the room. Magenta, Turbo, the team's liaison Jerry, a man and a woman who were the case handlers for the sidekicks (he should learn their names he supposed), and one public relations official (whos name Brick definitely didn't care about). He had asked for supers and somehow gotten paperpushers instead.

"Jerry, exactly who is this guy again?"

"Well, as you saw in the, um, opening credits, he goes by Trebla the Terrific. He's a high-profile villain who operates mostly in the southern sectors, but he tends to pop up in other sectors randomly. Central intelligence hasn't determined any overall goal beyond thrill-seeking."

"I see. Can I assume this was a one-off then?"

"Er, maybe. Trebla's general area of operation has been moving steadily east, likely due to the presence of Hellion's Henchmen. He's become a frequent client of theirs apparently."

"Wonderful. So what's the damage?"

"Well the bank was basically cleaned out. They haven't determined a total, but it looks like something to the tune of a little under a million dollars stolen, plus whatever it takes to replace the other miscellaneous items like computers. The real concern is the account files, the bank is working to lock down everything affected before Trebla can use it, but the investigation is-"

"Jerry, skip the rest please. What was the casualty report?"

“Oh, some good news there actually: zero casualties. And there were only a few minor injuries, mainly just people who weren’t careful in the rush to leave.”

“I’d hardly call what happened to Morph and Poena *minor* injuries,” said one of the handlers. Micah, Marrie… Mackenzie? Brick just couldn’t remember her name. “Morph has a concussion, second degree burns, and several lacerations on his arms and legs from where the injuries carried through his power. Poena has a bruised trachea, shattered collarbone, and four broken ribs. All of which could have been prevented if their *senior supervisors* had *stayed* with them.”

“The hostages took priority,” replied Magenta.

“And I’m sure a fist fight with Trebla was the best way to go about it.”

“*Excuse me*?”

“She has a point,” said the PR official, “You’ve not exactly done much to convince the parole board you aren’t more than a thug on a leash. Not that I blame you, you’re fitting right in. Frankly this team is one more shady member from being a gang anyways.”

“**Wh-, I, you-**”

“Hey, **up yours** buddy!” said Turbo, “Think you can do better be my fucking guest!”

“A powered monkey could do a better job. God knows it would make mine easier.”

“You wanna try it?! I can drop you off in front of Hellion’s in five minutes! See how damn well **you** do monkey suit!”

“Turbo calm it down. And you’re out of line,” said Brick, pointing at the relations official in lieu of a name. He waited a few moments to make sure the arguing wouldn’t start up again.

“Concerning the sidekicks; they’re alive, and that’s what’s important,” continued Brick, addressing the handlers, “We’ll send a request to Central to send a medical super if they can spare one. Morph and Poena can decide from there if they want to continue as capes. I realize this was rather rough as first outings go, but better they come to terms with what they’re facing now rather than later. I’ll have a talk with them about it. As for my team, I agree with their plan of engagement. When a villain like Trebla shows up, and takes as many hostages as he did, it’s an all hands on deck kind of situation. Prioritizing the hostages was the right choice, and leaving the sidekick with the civilians while the hero deals with the villain is standard procedure while mentoring.”

“Still, that whole building was teeming with hostile supers, wouldn’t it have been prudent for at least one of you to have stayed with them?” asked the other handler. The name Collin kept coming to Brick’s mind, but he knew that was wrong.

“Actually, Hellion’s powered minions are composed primarily of mutants,” offered Jerry, “They have super status only because they work as a group, and I sincerely doubt Hellion’s organization actually has more than a handful of real supers among their ranks. With Morph and Poena’s powers there was no reason to think they couldn’t handle it.”

“Still…”

“Man, do you wanna baby them forever?” complained Turbo, “They collared a couple punks and took their licks, move on already.”

“*As I said*, I’ll talk to them when they are feeling up to it,” Brick interjected, before Turbo’s callous tone could spark another argument, “But frankly if Morph and Poena’s injuries are the worst of it then I’d like to move on. We have higher priorities that need to be addressed, starting with-”

“I’m sorry, but I beg to differ,” interrupted the PR official. Brick suppressed a sigh. “While *you* might not be concerned with recent events, everyone else *is*, and it’s becoming a PR nightmare. As funny as it might be to watch four professional heroes get tossed around by a circus act, I can assure you no one is laughing.”

Brick gestured for Jerry to pass him one of the folders in a stack on the table. The red one.

“What is worse is that this business with Trebla only punctuates a growing trend. One that has been building ever since Kandor died and you assumed leadership of the E13 team.”

Brick's temple twitched at the mention of Kandor, but he opened the folder, and thumbed through to the section he wanted.

“Luckily this Trebla business happened in E12, and the liability falls mainly on their shoulders this time, but I have the bank’s lawyers breathing down my neck, and I’m having-”

Brick pulled a photo from the red folder, and flicked it across the table so that it landed in front of the official.

“-trouble arguing that you all aren’t somehow culpab-, culpa… what? What is...”

The photo was of a young woman, or more precisely, what had been a young woman. Multiple red lines crisscrossed her body where metal wires had sliced into her skin, and ultimately killed her. Held taut by the wires her corpse stood (or more exactly hung) in an alleyway, in a macabre parody of a person gesturing for help.

Brick flicked another photo over, this one of a man strung up in a similar web of wires in the same alley.

“From what officers at the scene could tell the woman died first, the man sometime after. Likely after noticing the ‘woman in distress’ and naively trying to help, getting him caught in the trap himself. The next person smartly ran first, and called the police after.”

“I-I see. But what does this-”

Brick flicked another photo. This one of a mostly eaten human corpse on a rooftop.

“An unfortunate victim of the banshee Magenta killed earlier this week.”

He flicked another picture: several corpses in a dumpster.

“These were found in a dumpster, a day after the banshee attack. Officers thought the bird did it because of the state of the corpses, but autopsy revealed that they were missing key organs, notably livers, bone marrow, fatty tissue, and sections of the brain. The injuries were strange, and the coroner couldn’t match them to any known monster types, so its officially a murder for now, with suspicion of cannibalism.”

Another photo; a man with a distinctive neck wound, his corpse a shriveled husk.

“This one is obviously a vamp, so I’ve already sent in a request for an extermination crew. I’m also making this one a priority,” said Brick,

directing his comment towards Magenta and Turbo, “I’d like to go one summer without an infestation.”

“I-I believe I see your poi-”

“Here’s an interesting art project,” said Brick, ignoring the somewhat green-looking PR official.

Yet another picture skimmed over the table. This was perhaps the worst one so far, as this corpse was actually *several*. Different animal parts had been stitched together to create a chimeric nightmare, one which could only have been more terrifying if it had been alive.

Among the various pieces several could be identified as human.

The PR official covered his mouth and turned away from the table, breathing slowing as he tried to keep his stomach under control. Turbo snickered half-heartedly at his distress, but everyone around the table was looking pale, minus Brick and Jerry who had already gone over the reports.

“I understand your concerns; we haven’t exactly made your job easy,” continued Brick, “But frankly yes, we *do* have higher priorities. This assortment of homicides share only two common factors: they were all inside E13, and they were all within the last week. You haven’t been with us through an Odd Summer yet. I don’t know how it goes back in the inner sectors, but out here this kind of bodycount is par for the course, and it will only get worse as we get deeper into Odd Summer. You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t give two figs about an undoubtedly insured bank. Clear?”

The PR official recovered himself somewhat (helped by the fact Jerry

gathered up the photos and put them away), but nodded towards Brick in acknowledgement, and held any further comments.

"Now, does anyone have any ideas for how to start approaching these murders? I'd like to get ahead of the curve while things are still relatively quiet."

Suggestions were made, one of the best coming from Jerry. One of the two minions to be arrested had been Buzzer, whose power would be incredibly useful in finding the vampires. The minion's lawyers were all too willing to make a deal if it included Buzzer and Pebble's freedom. Brick loathed the idea of just letting them walk, but a vamp nest really did need to be destroyed as soon as possible, before it grew too big and split into new offshoots. They were about to move on to the next case when Jerry's phone vibrated. He checked it and muttered a quiet curse.

"What's up Jerry."

"Trebla posted another video to his blog."

"How does he even... Screw it. Just play it."

Jerry set the video up on the flatscreen. Just like with the first video, an opening title scene announced the contents in an annoyingly loud font.

Super Sidekicks VS Mega Minions

The case handlers for the sidekicks immediately groaned, while the

PR official swore. Turbo zoomed out of the room and returned with snacks, earning him dirty looks from the Central agents. He shrugged; it was fun as long as it wasn't happening to him.

Trebla must have hacked or brought his own newscam drones in order to get some of this footage, as most of it was from outside the building at a distance. Nevertheless, the video quality and editing were top-notch, just like the first had been. It started with one of the Hellion minions sneaking into the room, and Brick felt a chill when he realized the sidekicks had gotten distracted by the fight outside, and neglected to guard the door after beating Pebbles and Buzzer. Damned rookie mistake! The fight wasn't over til you left the field, and sometimes not even then. Maybe he'd have to get more involved in their training after all.

"Hey! That's the cockroach who broke my leg!" said Turbo around a mouthful of crackers.

"Turbo mind the slurs," said Jerry automatically. Turbo rolled his eyes, but didn't argue.

Brick focused back on the video, where the minion in question was getting spotted by the branch manager's lucky (or unlucky) timing. Admittedly the minion's sneaking had looked somewhat insectile, but it quickly became apparent the minion was a shapeshifter and not a mutant. Likely the same one that slipped away from Magenta; they weren't exactly common. Things quickly devolved into a typical super brawl, and Brick started noting down things to address with the sidekicks later.

The group watched in relative silence, broken up only by quiet gasps as a sidekick took a hit, or Turbo crunching on his annoying snack food. Then Poena got caught, and Brick worried that the real injuries

had begun after the fight (some cowl types tended to get vindictive after they won), but Poena surprised him with her attempt to take out the pyro. Unfortunately it went badly, and there were sharp intakes of breath as Morph barely avoided the following blast and went flying through the window. Magenta muttered a curse at that part; she was one of the heroes at the scene who might have saved Morph, but apparently she hadn't seen it happen.

The next surprise was when it was the *minion* who caught and saved Morph. There were some confused mutters around the table, but that was quickly forgotten when Poena stabbed the shapeshifter. The PR official covered his eyes, and started cussing a storm under his breath.

Yeah… Brick didn't envy his job right now. It had been the right move on Poena's part; better to put down the threat first and sort out what was going on later, but admittedly it did *not* look good after that rescue. And dammit, she had been warned about using that spear, it was basically a guaranteed heart attack if-

Onscreen, the shapeshifter grabbed Poena, and methodically choked her out while slamming her against the floor; the spear that should have rendered him unconscious at a minimum sticking out of his chest the entire time.

The room was silent as the video completed. The minion went into the office for a bit, grabbed the branch manager, and on his way out kicked Poena into the table as she was recovering from unconsciousness (likely the cause of the broken ribs). Then the video even had scrolling end credits. Brick wasn't sure why, all of the normal roles like editing or special effects were just listed under the name "Lia", except for the actors who were listed as Poena, Morph, Ifrit, and ???.

“Well, that’s a problem,” said Brick, breaking the silence.

“Quite the understatement,” said the PR official, “Obviously Poena and Morph weren’t ready for deployment.”

“Hm? Oh not them. I thought they did rather well actually.”

“Did we watch the same video? What exactly did they do well?”

“Well they did the most important thing right: they didn’t run away. Don’t get me wrong, they’ll need polish, but I’m a lot more interested in keeping them on. Seems you were right about them Jerry.”

“Told ya so."

“Heh, don’t celebrate just yet. This still highlights what I was talking about; we’re outnumbered, and Hellion is always hiring. Any chance of an ID on the shifter?” asked Brick.

“Um, actually yes, costume looks familiar. It should be around… aha,” Jerry pulled out a picture of the minion (or at least one wearing a similar costume) sitting in an interrogation room, “He got picked up with a bunch of other perps a couple of days ago. They couldn’t get anything to stick, but they ID’d them all. Apparently he goes by Tofu, around eighteen years old, and he… likes rectangular objects? Interrogator noted he mentioned that a lot.”

“So basically we got nothing,” said Turbo, “Info is complete ratshit, no way *that* is a rookie.” Turbo’s fingers blurred over the controls and the image of ‘Tofu’ choking Poena showed on the screen.

“Maybe his power just makes him immune?” supplied Poena’s handler.

“Maybe. But he kept way too cool considering there were explosions going off in his face. Plus he was giving Ferrosa the rope-a-dope earlier, *and* he gave Magenta the slip. Mark my words, he’s a pro

playing possum."

Brick mulled that over. Turbo might have been exaggerating a bit (probably just mad about his leg), but whoever the shifter was, he was competent. Just their luck, they got two good powers with Morph and Poena, but Hellion matched them immediately with Ifrit and… Tofu.

Brick reached over to the controls and skipped the video over to the credits before letting them play.

"What's up Brick?" asked Magenta.

"His name is missing from the credits. Seems a bit odd."

"Think it means something?"

"Might be. Trebla doesn't seem like the type to miss a detail, which means it was on purpose."

"Probably just doesn't want his name associated with such buffoonery," muttered the PR official.

Brick arched an eyebrow at that, "…That might just be it. Jerry, think you can find me someone with a specific power set? Something a bit more subtle?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Someone who can start digging up dirt on guys like our shifter friend here. Right now we can't match their manpower, and Hellion's lawyers throw every trick in the book at us when we try to take players off the board. Time to stop trying to win an arms race; let's see how they like it when we play dirty."

The meeting continued for a little longer. The handlers eventually leaving to check up on the sidekicks, and the PR official and Jerry left soon after to do damage control and get the ball rolling on Brick's idea respectively. Magenta and Turbo stayed to go over the video together with Brick again; hashing out plans for engagement as a team was critical.

The video reached the part where the shifter was stabbed for the fifth time. There was a chance his power made him immune, but still...

"Turbo, Magenta... how long did you last when they were testing Poena's power?" asked Brick.

"Dark green," answered Turbo.

"Um, yellow," said Magenta sheepishly. It made sense, her forcefield meant she didn't have much experience with injury.

"How far did you make it bossman?" asked Turbo.

"Blue."

I made it back to my apartment a few hours later. Adder had kept me for a long time to show me multiple methods of non-lethal takedown. I wasn't sure how a 'sleeper hold' would have helped against someone who could shapeshift, but then again, Morph hadn't shifted his head or torso. Maybe it would have worked?

I walked over to the window and sat down, placing the potted plant down next to me along with some of Spikes's discarded spines. This had been a more troublesome job than I anticipated, but at least I had gotten a lot out of it.

First was of course the MRE's. I'd need to do some testing on how to apply their caloric packing to organic tissue. It would be useful if I could reduce my weight but maintain the same energy storage levels.

Second was the discarded spines from Spikes. The composition of the spines was nothing special, but the design was nice. They were actually hollow on the inside, in a way that suggested it was to help keep the spines pointed in the right direction during flight. Kind of like 'fletching' on an arrow, except in this case it served the dual purpose of causing anything it impaled to bleed out faster if it hit a good spot. The launching mechanism was harder to understand with only the projectile, but I suspected it used a tendon snap? Winding it too far on purpose, and then letting it **snap** to provide the launching force. Not as powerful as my slingshot design, but the aforementioned bleedout mechanic was probably the target goal of the weapon. I recorded it for later, I might find a use for it.

The last prize was the potted plant. I had already started researching plants on my phone, and I had asked other minions if there was anything I should know about it. Apparently all it needed was water and sunlight for day-to-day maintenance, and an expensive permit from the city that was normally not available to the average civilian. I asked if the permit requirement was because there was some kind of danger from owning a plant, and was glad to be assured that it was just because plants could provide a foothold for animals to survive from. When any animal was a potential disaster it was understandably important to regulate organic activity in the city.

Of course, they then told me that Sandra's legal department could forge a permit for me if I wanted to keep the plant and not pay fees. It seems illegal trafficking of organic organisms was a decent percentage of organized crime. A bit counterproductive to the city's defensive integrity, but I suppose different factions had different ideas on what was acceptable risk.

The other minions had assured me it couldn't trigger (a few had even laughed when I asked), so I (very carefully) tore a leaf and stem off of the plant before eating it. It was somewhat what I expected after eating the strawberry leaf, although I rolled my eyes at how many rectangular cells there were (probably why the bank deemed it worth having one). Some of this would be useful; the unusual cell walls had structural applications, and its method of gathering energy would certainly be useful. Not as good as eating, but in an emergency it might be useful. So far I hadn't needed to perform a core dump, but if it happened I might be able to use this 'photosynthesis' to recover from it.

I sat back and observed the plant. It really just… sat there. That's all it did, gather nutrients and grow. Relying on the fact that it was not a threat and barely nutritious to keep it safe. It was so different from the other organisms in the city that all struggled for survival. Even the dirt it sat in was soft and brown, filled with nutrients, so unlike the rest of the city which was all cement and metal. The closest I'd found to dirt like that was the sewers, where rat nests or broken pipes sometimes allowed for the build-up of organic waste.

It was an organism that survived and nothing else.

I could probably survive that way. Sit in an out of the way spot. Photosynthesize.

Might be safer than what I was currently doing.

Hmm...

My phone vibrated. I pulled it out to check the ID and was surprised to find it was Tim calling me. I answered it.

“Hello Tim.”

“Hey Tofu. You and Mikey done with work yet? His phone’s off so I can’t reach him.”

“I’m done, but I don’t know if he is.”

“Well find him if you can man. A new VRcade opened at the mall, we gotta try it out.”

“Oh, um, I’ll let Mikey know, but I was actually going to call it a day.” I had to get started on my priority algorithms, and I actually sort of wanted to hibernate as well. Even after deleting the pain memory I’d noticed that my thinking was a bit sluggish; this job had been stressful.

“Aw come onnnnn, live a little.”

“I dunno, I kinda have stuff to do…”

“Pleeeeease? I have an idea for triggers I really want to try. I’ll buy you a *cinnabon.*”

“A cinnabon?”

“Yeah man, or whatever else they have at the foodcourt.”

Food *what?!*

“I’m on my way.”

New Dawn Inc.

“Hey Brett? They want you up in meeting room two.”

Brett looked up from his computer screen with bleary eyes, “What for?”

“Dunno, but I’d get up there soon. Boss said it was priority.”

“It’s always priority.”

“Hey, that’s just what they told me man.”

Brett grumbled, and turned to his computer to start locking down his work station. He hated being called away from his work. Not because it was interesting, but because he had to lock down his station *every* time he so much as went to take a piss. His cubicle was in an open room with dozens of other employees, and despite everyone having had around five background checks, security protocols had to be followed. If he didn’t, his supervisor would give him an unbearably long talking-to about “the importance of maintaining a friendly and safe workplace environment.”

He finished locking up and headed for the elevator. At least he was able to deflect the chattier coworkers by saying he had a priority meeting. Damn he hated being in a general office area. Everyone wanted to chat, or gossip, or talk about the weekly report. For the billionth time he cursed Odd Summer for ruining his project. He missed talking to actual scientists, experts in their fields who wanted to actually *work* on their projects. When Dr. Mason had offered him a spot on his project two years ago, it had seemed like a dream come true, and it had been for a while. A cure for Mutavus. It would change the world for the better if they could crack it, and between Dr. Mason's knowledge of microbiology and Brett's tinker power it had seemed in reach.

True, the project goal had changed to making an autonomous weapon for New Dawn Inc. once they began footing the bill, but that was a minor hindrance. The weapons company ran a lot of wildlife suppression work out in the wilds past Fortress City's walls, and on one of the forays had recovered a very unique mutant animal sample. Of course New Dawn's first idea had been to make a weapon out of it (*dull-witted troglodytes!*), but trying to weaponize the sample had admittedly advanced Brett's nanite research by leaps and bounds. There had been drawbacks, namely that the nanites were seen as foreign objects by benedicci, and the two did *not* play well together, but he had been getting closer and closer towards solving that problem. The prototype had proven unexpectedly helpful in that regard; being able to see how his code affected the nanites' control over cells in real time had been a godsend, and he had started to resent working on the weapon less and less, and see it more as a tool.

In the end he had made something that was a true engineering marvel, and not just some gadget or gizmo that would eventually break down the moment its maker moved on or died. He had become quite proud of his work on the prototype, for all it had started a weapon.

Until it escaped...

It kept Brett up some nights. He had looked over the data dumps hundreds of times since the accident, but hadn't found any explanation for it's anomalous behavior. Just the slight uptick of its focus on combat for two weeks or so and then BAM! The stupid cougar triggered, and ruined everything somehow. It was the only explanation he could think of.

The elevator dinged as the doors opened, and he got on. On the way up his thoughts were pulled back to the prototype over and over. He had designed the code to allow the prototype to operate autonomously indefinitely, but that was *all* it had! There was no off button, no deadman switch, no reason to think it would ever just *stop* without a command to do so, and now it was *out there*. The only consolation Brett had was that the nanite self-destruct failsafe couldn't be circumvented, no matter how damaged the core unit became.

He still remembered pulling the damaged command receiver from the remains…

He trudged out of the elevator and down the hall, to the meeting room where a no-doubt boring lecture or meeting was waiting for him. Maybe this was his divine punishment, sentenced to office trivialities for the sin of not implementing planned obsolescence into a prototype.

He stopped before the conference room door and took a deep breath, gathering himself. Maybe it wouldn't be that bad? Maybe they would want to discuss the finer points of molecular kevlar sheathing? Not the report he should have had filled out last Thursday? No, probably

not. They'd probably want a report on his report situation. He opened the door.

...

"Dr. Mason?"

"Hello Brett."

To Brett's complete surprise Dr. Mason was seated at the conference table in front of him, as well as…

"Mr. Savvy! Please, please come in. Have a seat, we have a lot to discuss," said Mr. Slick. The man was exactly as Brett remembered him. Pressed suit, gelled hair, his laptop open next to him, he might as well have stepped through time.

Brett moved to the table in a daze. What was going on? Was the project approved to continue when Odd Summer ended? Was it completely canceled? He took a seat next to Dr. Mason, who smiled and nodded at him. He dared to hope.

"Let me start right off with the good news. We found your prototype!" announced Mr. Slick.

Brett's mouth fell open.

“Y-y-you did? Oh my god! D-did you recover it? Where has it been?! Was… was anyone hurt? Oh god, it must have right? What **happened**?!”

“Calm yourself Mr. Savvy. I’m not exaggerating when I say I have good news. We haven’t recovered it yet, but the situation is not at all what we expected, or even could have predicted. Here, I’ve shown Dr. Mason already, but I believe this video can detail what is going on better than words ever could.”

Mr Slick adjusted the laptop so Brett could see it better, and then pressed play. Brett wasn’t sure what he had expected. Maybe a frightened news reporter detailing a monster attack, or grainy security camera footage of the prototype killing some poor gas station employee.

But this? No. As the footage played he went from confusion, to doubting suspicion, to complete bewilderment. Never in his wildest dreams could he have expected this. The video ended, and Brett looked back and forth between Dr. Mason and Mr. Slick, expecting them to tell him it was an elaborate hoax at his expense. But the confetti and camera crew never appeared.

“That… that was the prototype.”

“Indeed it was Mr. Savvy. Seems New Dawn Inc. owes you and Dr. Mason an apology. Obviously the prototype was farther along than we thought.”

“But it *wasn’t*! I knew its code inside and out. There’s no way it could have progressed this far on its own…,” he turned to Dr. Mason, “...is there?”

“I was hoping you would have the answer to that,” said Dr. Mason, “This isn’t exactly my area of expertise.”

“I don’t believe this is anyone’s area of expertise,” said Mr. Slick, “Which is why New Dawn Inc. is restarting the project, effective immediately. On behalf of New Dawn Inc. I’m offering you both-”

“Restarting the project?” interrupted Brett, “**Now**? The prototype is still out there! We should be focused on cleaning up this *disaster* and you want to make another?! And you stopped the project because of Odd Summer to begin with! I’m not sure what exactly I saw in that video, but Odd Summer is definitely involved in this somehow. A new technomancer probably stole it, or tampered with it, or… ***hell***, maybe computers can trigger now for all the **fuck** I know.”

“Calm yourself Mr. Savvy,” said Mr. Slick. His tone was ice.

Brett’s mouth clicked shut; he suddenly remembered who he was talking to.

“…Brett makes a good point Mr. Slick,” said Dr. Mason, “We don’t know exactly what happened, and there could be dangers we aren’t seeing.”

“We already have an example of the worst case scenario Dr. Mason; the super weapon escaped, it was released into the general populace, and the worst thing that happened was that it got itself a *job*. I’ll admit it’s choice of vocation isn’t ideal, but it’s hardly the murdering monster Mr. Savvy seems to be imagining. The heroes will arrest it just like they do hundreds of other criminals every day, we’ll collect it after the fact, and then the problem is solved.”

“But the risk…” said Brett, less confidently.

“Gentlemen, I **understand**. You started this project with the intention to cure Mutavus and better the world. New Dawn Inc. agrees that is a worthwhile goal, and if it means securing your cooperation it is willing to finance your research towards a Mutavus cure indefinitely.”

Both Brett's and Mason's eyes widened at that.

"**But**, I believe you are missing the bigger picture. The fact of the matter is you have already achieved the design goal we originally set for you. You've created an autonomous weapon, one that can operate unguided, repair itself, **grow** itself, and adapt to any situation! It can differentiate friend from foe, apply **non-lethal** force to a target, and *it can contend with **supers***! Can you imagine if we had these helping every hero team in the city? Sweeping the underground tunnels of monsters, performing search and rescues, helping heroes secure dangerous triggers and villains? No more putting the lives of officers in danger, no more waiting for the right power to fall into the hands of the right person. You want to better the world? This is the type of discovery that can do that, it can push back the horrors of Odd Summer, and it all hinges on one simple question:

"Can you make more?"

Side Dish #4

A note from Gogglesbear

Wowee, that took too long. Sorry folks, it was a busy couple of weeks. If you missed the easter egg, here's the answer. Baneangel managed to find it, so give him cookies if you see him.

Spoiler: Spoiler

#4f75636874686174687572 74 data.sense;

The number is a hexidecimal code, that translates into: ouchthathurt.

The poll is just a little bit of fun. I totally won't use the answers for evil.

Anaand, Billy. 24

Anthon, Robert. 31

Gretson, Stephanie. 22

Major, Jeff. 44

W5

Roth, Cavan. 37

Roth, Bethanie. 36

Roth, Jerry. 12

Zac, Clarke. 67

SW4

Glen, Gr-

“Whatcha reading there stud?”

“Hm?” mumbled Maxwell, looking up from his tablet. The voice had come from his friend, coworker, and sometimes-lover Steph Watson. Currently she was playing up the lover bit, standing at the entrance to his penthouse’s kitchen in nothing but panties and a red apron that complemented her cocoa colored skin. Unprofessional to date a coworker? Maybe. But they weren’t exactly dating. More like a friends with benefits situation. In their line of work you didn’t get much opportunity for relationships, and those you did make tended to be fleeting, so you didn’t pass up a good thing when it happened.

“Oh nothing, just the morning paper,” Maxwell answered.

“You still read that thing? Well put it away for now, I made breakfast.”

“You can cook?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“For shame. I slave over a hot toaster and rehydrator and you question my skills?”

Maxwell chuckled and put down the tablet, following her into the kitchen, “How could I have ever doubted?”

“Damn right.”

Despite their teasing, Steph really could do a lot with a little, and they both tucked in with gusto. The rehydrated eggs were great, and whatever she had done to the bacon was divine (the real stuff, one of the few luxuries Maxwell accepted and even insisted upon). He tried to pester her into telling him how she cooked it, but she only responded with: “Nuh-uh, need to keep you on the hook.”

“Already there babe, already there.”

They ate, and flirted, and tried somewhat successfully to avoid work-talk. Right up until Maxwell’s earpiece beeped an alarm (he had forgotten to take it out last night, a frequent occurrence). Maxwell automatically lifted his hand to his ear and pressed the device in the correct way to receive communications, while Steph scrambled to grab her earpiece off the kitchen counter where she had left it.

Maxwell and Steph listened to an incoming report from Central, scarfing down the last bites of food before confirming that they were on their way. They left the dishes on the counter and ran for the elevators at the back of Maxwell’s penthouse suite, not bothering to dress. They grabbed separate elevators, slapping hands down on the keypads to register their fingerprints and unlock the doors. Maxwell snuck one final glance at the vision of Steph in just panties before he entered the elevator, and they both laughed when he saw she was checking him out too.

But then he entered the elevator and the doors closed, his expression quickly becoming neutral as his mind focused on the business at hand. He placed his hand on another (slightly more innocuous) pad, and said, “Guardian, dress protocol, rooftop.” A robotic woman’s voice answered, “The Guardian, recognized,” and the elevator ascended to the top floor of the Central heroes headquarters. Panels eventually opened, and pieces of his costume folded out on robotic arms that helped him dress in the skin tight material. Soon he was wearing his blue and white costume, with the emblem of Fortress City across his back. The small blue domino mask was the last piece, and he put it on himself. If it were up to him he wouldn’t have ever bothered with a mask; he’d once heard his father say “I can’t trust a man whose face I can’t see,” and those words had stuck with him. But, everyone from the marketing department, to military advisors,

to lawyers, to retired capes had told him to put on a damned mask. That last one had been the real clincher, so Maxwell had settled on a thin blue domino mask that barely covered his eyes. He had guessed (correctly) that keeping a secret identity *truly* secret wasn't really possible without extreme measures anyways (which he didn't want to bother with), and instead he wanted to present an image that people could trust. It was important to him.

But he had to admit, the mask looked pretty darn good on him.

The elevator reached the top floor and the door opened, exiting into a reinforced observation room disguised as a rooftop electrical closet/ maintenance shed. Next to him a second elevator opened, and out stepped the Silver Star.

Steph Watson to him.

Her costume was a bit more armored than his, looking more like one of those super compact astronaut suits that tinkers loved to make (he was half convinced the nerds made them like that just to see curves on the lady astronauts, an observation Steph had rolled her eyes at). The fact that her mask was also a full helmet with an opaque faceplate, and her power had her floating a foot off the ground, completed the impression that she should be bouncing around a moon somewhere.

"You ready to fly?" Steph asked, her voice slightly digitized by the helmet.

"Always."

They stepped out onto the roof, and Maxwell released his power. His was one of those powers that never really turned off, he could only suppress it. Luckily suppressing it wasn't difficult, and even if he didn't it rarely caused problems. Now it covered him like a second skin, and with a thought he went from 'standing still' to 'upwards, thirty-five degree tilt, five mph.'

Vector control, the scientists had called it. Anything that came within a short distance of himself he could control the vector of, including himself. At this moment, he used it to fly. Easily his favorite part. He rose up into the sky, which today was cloudless if still a bit dark; the sun had barely started to rise into the sky, and several stars still shown.

"What kind of villain starts shit at six a.m. on a Sunday?" asked Steph, floating up to his side.

"I know right? Should be illegal."

She laughed, and they took off in the direction Central command had indicated. While both of them were technically part of Central Sector's hero team, things rarely went wrong in Central itself. It was mostly government facilities, and between the military police, private security companies, and the dozens of heroes who might be in Central at any one moment, no villain in their right mind would cause trouble there. The few not in their right mind who tried got put down rather quickly. As such, Maxwell tended to have his status marked as available to respond to the surrounding sectors instead, which was where he and Steph were headed now. The inner sectors were much smaller than the outer ones due to Fortress City's design, but it still took five minutes of flight to reach S2, where a disturbance had been reported at a construction site.

The site in question was the top of a skyscraper, where a super brawl last year had sheared off the top couple floors. Maxwell remembered helping with clean-up for hours after that incident, but luckily no one had died. Now the half-reconstructed floors and support beams stood like an exposed bone from a wound. Work on the building had stopped part-way for one reason or another, and probably wouldn't restart until several months after Odd Summer.

Of course, the large robot that was currently dismantling the work done so far certainly wasn't helping things. It was twenty feet tall, with a cockpit that looked stolen from a bulldozer set into the chest. In fact, all of its parts looked like they were stolen from construction machines, making the mech seem like it had transformed from a bulldozer or earth mover not seconds ago. As Maxwell and Steph watched, the mech's right hand reached out and (in a strangely calm manner) knocked down a cement wall, before stacking the rubble onto a pile to the side.

"What in the world is going on here?" muttered Steph.

"Not sure, but if he's trying to steal materials he's not being very subtle about it."

"I don't think he's a tinker on a budget. See the way the joints move? There's not enough supporting mechanisms."

Maxwell took a better look at the mechanics of the mech. Steph was right, beyond a few moving hydraulics to complete the look, the mech might as well have been moving by magic. That meant it wasn't a tinker device, or even a gizmo. It was a construct, animated only by its owner's power. But if that was the case, why steal materials? Theft was the only reason he could think of for the systematic dismantling he was witnessing.

Maxwell and Steph circled the mech for a while, to gather information and hash out a plan. Then Maxwell approached cautiously and tried to address the pilot, who was semi-visible through the tinted window of the cockpit. From what Maxwell could see it was a guy in army fatigues.

“Sir, I’m a licensed Fortress City hero. I’m gonna have to ask you to exit the vehicle.”

“Buzz off,” came the reply. Not encouraging, but better than nothing at all.

“Sir, the destruction of Fortress City infrastructure is a felony offense. If you don’t cease and desist now, I am obligated to use-”

Maxwell didn’t get to finish his sentence, because the mech had swung one of its bulky arms at him. His power activated automatically, and deflected the swing straight up and away from him.

“Force it is then.”

Maxwell rocketed up and punched the arm that had taken a swing at him, ramping up his power as he made contact. He tried to rip the mechanical arm from its socket by sending it straight up on an even faster vector, but the joint held, and the entire mech went up a few feet before gravity protested, pulling it back down with a roof-shaking crunch. Definitely a construct of some kind, a normal machine would never have withstood the strain.

The mech’s second arm came at him, this one with two dirt excavator shovels giving it a ‘claw’ for a hand. It tried to clamp down on his leg, but the mech’s feet were suddenly pulled out from under it, and it crashed to its knees. Steph had entered the fight, and was using her telekinesis to restrain the construct. It struggled on hands and knees, but couldn’t stand back up with the Silver Star focused on it. Not

surprising; while technically she was a ‘normal’ telekinetic, Steph was powerful, and Maxwell had personally seen her toss dump trucks like hacky sacks. Maxwell used the opportunity to get at the cockpit of the mech, and with a touch the door flew open, and nearly off its hinges.

“Stop! Stop! You don’t understand,” yelled the pilot. He was an older man, much older than Maxwell had expected. Once upon a time the man must have been very fit, his muscles still taunt under weather blasted skin, but now his army fatigues (real ones, threadbare and faded) hung loose on his bony frame. Scars criss-crossed his skin, including a particularly nasty one that came down from his right temple and landed somewhere in his bushy white beard. Around his neck was a set of dog tags (***Panama*** *tags, good lord*), but what really gave Maxwell pause were the man’s eyes; a brilliant winter blue, they were full of tears, and the man had obviously been in distress for quite some time if the streaks on his face were anything to go by.

“I can’t let them erase him!” yelled the aging veteran.

“Sir please, I’m willing to listen but you have to disembar-”

“HE WAS MY SON!”

The old soldier swung at him, giant robot forgotten. Maxwell’s power activated and brought the flying fist to a gentle standstill, and the next punch, and the next. Eventually the punches ceased, and the soldier practically deflated in front of Maxwell as his willpower finally broke. He sank back onto the pilot seat and dropped his face into his hands, weeping openly. Once Steph realized the fight was over she joined Maxwell, and together they helped get the old man down out of the construct. A few minutes later Central sent a skimmer to pick up the man, which gave Steph and Maxwell breathing room to discuss what had happened.

“He said this was about his son?” asked Steph.

“Apparently so, which makes it strange that he’d decide to dismantle a construction site.”

“Maybe his son died in whatever caused this?”

“No, no one died in this one. This was the one where Piffle and his group tried to set up that mind-control tower that didn’t work. Happened last year.”

“Oh right, that one you talk about all the time. That was here?”

“Yeah, I remember it because no one died and-”

“-you were stuck cleaning up the whole afternoon, even after the sector head congratulated you. You may have mentioned it,” finished Steph.

“Heh. Yes, I may have mentioned it,” his smile faded a bit, “which raises the question again: why’d he target this place? Obviously it was personal.”

Steph tilted her head in thought, “You don’t suppose… his son is Piffle?”

Maxwell raised his eyebrows, “I… suppose he could have been. Piffle got life for this incident. Most parents wouldn’t be happy about that, even if their kid deserved it.” The idea didn’t really mesh in Maxwell’s head though. A conniving sociopath like Piffle being the son of that old veteran? It didn’t fit.

“Tell you what,” said Steph, “I think I’ll follow the skimmer in, and maybe I’ll get the chance to ask him.”

“You sure? I could go.”

“Nah, I can already see you twitching to get on with patrol. Maybe I can convince them to go easy on the old guy while I’m at it; it's not like he hurt anyone. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Thanks Silvy, I appreciate it,” said Maxwell, using his work nickname for her.

They split up, and Maxwell headed out on patrol. He usually flew along the outside edge of the first ‘ring’ of sectors; close enough to reach Central sector inside five minutes while skimming over as many sectors as he could. But, since he was already out in the second ring he decided to straddle the line between the second ring of sectors and the third. Technically speaking he didn’t need to be doing patrols outside his assigned sector, but while Central was a bit bigger than the surrounding sectors due to being the center of the city, it wasn’t worth it to patrol there; nothing ever happened, and if it did they’d call him directly. In fact, if Odd Summer wasn’t active the inner sectors tended to be rather dead from a crime standpoint. Oh it still happened, but patrolling was a waste of time then. It had always irked him that as he got promoted they kept moving him inward towards Central. On one hand it gave him more resources and a better location to intercept major threats to the city, but when those disasters weren’t happening it left him with too much time on his hands. So much so, that some of the other teams had complained about having the ‘big guy’ looking over their shoulders all the time.

Until Odd Summer rolled around. Then having a flying bruiser around (who could reach the surrounding sectors in less than ten minutes) was suddenly on everyone's wishlist.

He patrolled for the rest of the morning, cruising at a leisurely fifty mph. The street he followed marked the switch from the second ring to the third one, and if he followed its gentle curve he’d eventually make a complete lap of the second ring. He wondered how many laps he’d be able to make before something happened?

The answer was two. Then he got to witness a car suddenly *blur*,

ghosting through the stalled traffic in front of it in a burst of speed, before slamming on the brakes and skidding out, eventually fishtailing into a traffic light pole. He was there in seconds, pressing his communicator once just to inform that he was occupied with an incident.

He approached cautiously, but once he had eyes on the driver he hurried to get to her. She was a middle-aged woman in a business suit, and was gripping the steering wheel in a death grip while staring out of the front of her car with wide eyes. Obviously she hadn't expected the sudden power display. He tapped on the window to get her attention, making sure that he had on his most winning smile, the one Steph called his 'Boyscout smile'. The woman's eyes opened even wider, if that were possible, and she hurriedly fumbled for the button to lower the window.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry. Oh my god. I didn't, I didn't mean to! I was just late for work. You're the Guardian! Oh my god, the Guardian. I'm so so sorry. I… I don't..."

"Calm down ma'am. Deep breaths. You aren't in trouble, and no one was hurt."

Maxwell waited for the lady to compose herself a bit more before continuing with the knitty-gritty of it. It took less than three questions to determine that it had indeed been the woman's power that caused her car to crash, and that she hadn't had a power when she woke up that morning. A power awakening. Technically a 'trigger' event since it had probably been in response to her being late for work. Semantics; she had powers now.

He stayed with her until emergency services could arrive, answering her questions about what she should do (mainly assuring her that she

didn't need to stop her career and be a hero), and helping her call her boss so that she wouldn't be in trouble for missing the day. By the time an officer arrived, the woman was in much higher spirits, and he found he was as well. Always nice when things turned out fine.

Maxwell continued his patrol, stopping briefly at a soydog stand for lunch. As he ate, his mind drifted back to the early morning encounter with the old veteran. He was quite curious as to what grudge the man might have had against the building, and he wracked his mind for extra details on the original destruction of the top floors. But, no matter how hard he tried he simply couldn't recall anyone having been hurt during that incident. Evacuations had been handled well for that one, and no one had been hurt beyond a few bruises and maybe a broken bone or two between the heroes and a few of Piffle's minions.

Maxwell slapped his forehead; *of course*! The veteran's son must have been one of Piffle's hired goons. He couldn't imagine the cowl being the son of the old veteran, but a faceless minion? Easily. Lots of people went into henching for one reason or another, mostly those desperate for cash and a fast payday. It was all too easy for Maxwell to imagine the veteran's son hiring on for one job, thinking he could earn enough to pay whatever bills were overdue, but then getting caught and winding up in prison.

Maxwell sighed. It was probably too pretty a picture, but it made more sense than someone actually caring about Piffle. *Man, what a scumbag he was*.

Maxwell crumpled up the soydog wrapper and dropped it in a trash bin as he passed over. He was about to try and contact Steph when the next encounter of the day revealed itself. There were police sirens in the distance, and he followed the noise until he could spot two

police cruisers pursuing a green sedan. It must have been modified, because the police hadn't shut its engine down, and it was staying ahead of them by a decent margin.

He pressed his communicator, "This is Guardian. I'm seeing a high-speed chase and am going to pursue." He started flying in the chase's direction when a voice spoke in his ear.

"Negative Guardian. Please head for sector N1. Fire in progress."

"Central the chase is right in front of me. N1 is almost two sectors away, can't someone else get it?"

"The W2 team have already been alerted to the car chase; the fire requires a flier. Please head there immediately."

"...Alright. On my way."

He took a last look at the car chase and turned to fly towards N1, burning his internal reservoir of energy to get there faster. While his power was automatic in most cases, directing it to do something costed him, and going above his limits cost even more. Luckily hovering wasn't one of those costs, although being able to arrive at N1 in under two minutes was (powers were quirky that way). Better to burn a bit extra for speed though; fires killed fast.

When he arrived, he spotted the problem location before Central could give him directions. A plume of smoke was rising out of a gutted, eleventh-floor highrise apartment. He made a beeline to it.

The highrise was one of the more ostentatious buildings around, built to house multiple penthouses with different designs. The one he stopped in front of had a balcony, but the floor to ceiling window that led to it had been blasted, the edges of the hole still dripping

from whatever heat had melted it.

A super did this.

He was about to call in to get a fireproof cape for backup when a scream sounded from inside the apartment. Without a second thought he flew in through the melted window, flying low to try and stay away from the smoke. The apartment was a complete mess. There were holes in everything; the furniture, the walls, the floor, all of it looking like lava had melted through them, not to mention the sporadic fires that were everywhere. Safety proofing had helped, but it was only a matter of time before the numerous fires overwhelmed what was left. Whatever made the holes had blown a hole through the water main, and the water that should have gone to the sprinklers was draining uselessly down a hole in the floor.

He followed the increase of holes deeper into the penthouse before he located the source. In a large living room, with a comfy green couch and table at its center, two women were huddled to the side against a wall, trapped by a ring of melted holes that had decayed the floor too much to walk on. On the other side of the room was the culprit. A man was huddled in a corner, as far from the women as he could get, but the floor and walls had melted around him, and he was trapped in the molten slag. He struggled weakly to extract himself, but he was shivering uncontrollably, and after a particularly bad spasm a ribbon of molten fire burst from him and hit the ceiling above, dripping more molten slag on top of him. Obviously he had no real control over his power.

A bad trigger.

Maxwell hurriedly flew over to the two women, he had to get them

out of here first.

“Are you both alright? Can you move?” he asked.

The one on the left continued to cry as she hugged her friend, but the one on the right pointed to the middle of the room where the couch was.

“J-Johnny. He, he was…”

Maxwell looked and wished he hadn’t. There was a large hole melted through the once-nice couch, and on the floor in front of it were shoes, facing the table, with the feet of the former owner still in them. The stumps still smoked.

Maxwell recognized the pink smudges on the table in front of the feet. It was a party drug called Dust, a hallucinogen that was *supposed* to be non-addictive, and therefore easy to quit before Odd Summer rolled around. In reality, users often grew too comfortable with the substance, and then found that going two to three months without it after previously using heavily was more than they could bear. Maxwell had never tried recreational drugs himself, but whatever effect they had must have been quite something if people were willing to risk a bad trigger for them. *What was that statistic again? Twenty-five percent chance of a bad trigger per trip? Thirty-five?*

Maxwell turned back to the two ladies, “Alright, I’m gonna get you two out of here. I want you both to hang on to me, and don’t open your eyes until I say so. Okay?”

Both ladies practically flung themselves onto him, more than willing to do exactly what The Guardian said if it got them out of the hell they suddenly found themselves in. Maxwell put an arm around each, and activated his power to both levitate them and keep smoke and embers away. He moved them carefully but quickly out of the apartment, reminding them to keep their eyes closed before he dropped over the balcony. Seconds later he had them safely on the ground and across the street from the high-rise building. When they opened their eyes they immediately hugged each other and began crying anew, the sudden change of location from a burning nightmare to a safe sidewalk seeming like a miracle.

Maxwell rocketed back up into the air, intent on the apartment, when a crackle in his comm gave him some well needed relief.

“This is Blazerunner to Guardian, you’re looking mighty toasty, what’s the situation?”

“*Damn* it’s nice to hear from you. I’ve got a bad trigger stuck in the burning apartment. He’s giving off discharges that are burning through the walls and setting things on fire. I don’t know how many more people are trapped in there, and the structural support won’t last much longer.”

“Shoot. Alright, I’ll handle the fire and Mr. Hot Tamale, you handle anyone else in the building?”

“Sounds good.”

Maxwell met Blazerunner at the entrance to the burning apartment. Blazerunner was a tinker, who rode in a modified skimmer designed to handle just this sort of situation. Skimmers looked a little like helicopters without the blades. Transport units of various kinds would normally be attached under the ‘tail’ of the skimmer (normally

prisoner transports), but in Blazerunner's case he had two tanks full of fire suppressant. A nozzle on a robotic arm extended from the front to start spraying down the apartment, and once the fire was banked Maxwell went in to begin looking for other residents, stopping only long enough to yell to the unfortunate "Hot Tamale" that help was coming.

It took a while to clear the building of residents, but other than that, Blazerunner had the situation well in hand. Maxwell thanked him for the assist, and then started flying slowly in the direction of W2 where his patrol had been interrupted. He was still a bit peeved that he'd been called for this one, but there was no guarantee that Blazerunner would have made it in time for the two women, so it had been worth it in the end. Still, he hated to leave things unfinished, so he contacted Central to see what had become of the car chase.

He listened to Central's update. Scowled. Then put on a burst of speed, burning energy once again.

The car chase had gone badly. The green sedan's escape had been cut short when it plowed into the side of a public bus, embedding its entire front half. Then, the criminals that survived got into a shootout with the cops, putting surrounding civilians in danger, and preventing help from getting to the injured people on the bus. This did not turn out well for the criminals when one of the bus passengers mutated. One criminal was stabbed by a tendril before they realized what was happening, and only a handful of passengers

managed to get off the bus before the exits were blocked. The speedster that showed up didn't have the powerset to handle the situation, and his attempts simply exacerbated the mutation as mutavus tried to find a 'solution' to dealing with a speedster. This meant that the mutation had advanced even farther by the time the second hero arrived, and resulted in him being unable to act as well.

Then the Guardian landed next to the two heroes.

"Anything special besides the tendrils and spikes?" he asked, keeping his eyes on the mutant.

"Um, some of the tendrils are thin and hard to see, like razorwire," answered the speedster.

"How long since the last noticeable change?"

"Maybe… ten minutes or so? Why does that matter?" asked the speedster.

"When mutavus activates, it continues mutating the host until the host is out of danger. If you can't put them down immediately, you need to wait for them to stop mutating. Otherwise mutavus will just keep going, until the threat is removed, or the host is dead."

"O-oh," said the speedster, who had *not* waited for the mutation to abate. He must be new.

Maxwell approached the bus. A web of tendrils originated from a point somewhere near the impact between the two vehicles, and it seemed as if it had been trying to make a protective shell using the remains of the bus. He flew in through a window, and immediately his power activated to keep the razorwire tendrils and spikes from eviscerating him. He floated down the bus aisle, using his power to push tendrils out of his path. There weren't any other people on the bus anymore; the biomass for the tendrils had to come from

somewhere.

He reached the center of the tendril mass. There laid the torso of the man who had mutated, tendrils extending from points all over his body. The impact of the green sedan had sheared off everything below the waist, but had pinched the open wound closed, which explained how he survived long enough for mutavus to kick in. Unfortunately, a stray bullet had taken the poor man in the eye shortly after the mutation started, blowing out the back of his head.

Maxwell sighed. There was no one to save here anymore. Mutavus was mercilessly efficient in how it went about "saving" its host. But it needed fuel. If you didn't have the fat reserves to fuel what it had planned, then prepare to lose a few "unnecessary" organs. The only food around is a dead rat? You'd best eat it, before mutavus found its own "solution". The only possible source of fuel after exhausting all other options is people?... Too bad. Sometimes, in the case of friends and family, or if the person had a strong sense of morality, Maxwell had seen people resist the urges mutavus triggered long enough to die before they hurt someone. No such luck today. With the man's brain destroyed there was no "moral compass" to hold mutavus back, and it had simply… done its best.

He stared at the man's face. The one eye that was still there opened, but didn't focus on anything in particular. No one was home. Maxwell leaned in.

"I'm sorry."

The Guardian exited the now still bus, and flew upwards to avoid answering questions or talking to others. But then his comm beeped

an alarm, and his hand went up automatically to answer.

“Guardian, W7 has just declared a lockdown. A high speed skimmer will rendezvous with you in thirty-five seconds.”

“Acknowledged,” he replied.

He waited.

Steph got in at two in the morning, dead tired. She didn’t bother to redress after the elevator stripped her costume off; her plan was to just fall into bed and cuddle the beefcake until dreamland took her, but instead she grabbed a robe when she realized the lights were on and sounds were coming from the living room. Was someone over? It wouldn’t be the first time a few teammates stayed late to unwind after the day’s events. But, when she got to the living room it was just Maxwell sitting on the couch and watching the news. In costume...

“Hey there stud, what are you still doing up?”

Maxwell startled a bit, but greeted her with a smile before muting the television.

“Oh, I was just waiting up. Wanted to ask you if you managed to find out what was up with our army veteran friend.”

“You waited until two in the morning just for that?”

“Two in the… oh. Guess I must have lost track of time.”

Steph bit her lip. Truth was she *had* found out what was up with the veteran, but she had hoped Max would forget about it. No such luck; Max could be like a bulldog when it came to this kind of thing. She took a deep breath before deciding to rip off the bandaid.

"Well… the old man didn't talk, but I managed to get his name and look him up. His son ran a small company out of an office on one of the floors that Piffle destroyed. He lost everything when it was destroyed."

"...Ah. So I suppose he…"

"...Last week. The funeral was yesterday."

Neither said anything more, but Steph could see Max physically deflate. The Piffle incident had been one of the stories Max loved to bring up, because no one had died in it. She drifted over to him and pulled him off the couch, helping him peel off his costume (and throwing the comm in a corner) before leading him off to bed.

"Come on stud. Been a rough day; let's get ourselves some shut-eye."

"Yeah," replied Maxwell. Suddenly, against all expectations, he chuckled, "Speaking of rough, I got to see a lady fishtail her brand new Plaustra into a streetlight. She was late to work and triggered. Ghosted a whole row of traffic."

"... Cause she was late to work?"

"Yeah."

They looked at each other, before bursting into laughter. The kind

where you could only breathe to laugh harder. By the time they were finished, they had fallen into bed, and were out like lights soon after.

Ch30 Food Courting

After getting off the phone with Tim, I sent a message to Mikey using my mask. Luckily I still had administrator privileges. He called me a few seconds later while I waited for the elevator to the base.

“Hey Tofu, where’s the fire?”

“There is no fire. Tim said he was doing stuff at the mall and if we go he’d buy me a cinnabon, so we have to meet him at the mall. Are you done with your job yet?”

“Ha, I figured it was something like that. Yeah we were just driving into base. I can meet you in the elevator corridor in a bit?”

We talked about Tim’s plans when the elevator I was waiting for opened, revealing Cindy and Maz in civilian clothing. They looked like they had been talking.

“Hey Tofu.”

“Hello Cindy, hello…?”

“Natasha,” supplied Maz (I hadn’t known her civilian name), “and I should call you…?”

“Just Tofu is fine.”

“Yo did you say Cindy?” asked Mikey through the phone, “If that was her invite her man.”

“Why?” I asked, stepping aside to let Cindy and Natasha through.

“Why? Well, uh, she seems cool? Why not?”

“Cool? I thought she was hot?”

“Dude don’t… just do me this solid man, come onnn.”

“But-”

“Two cinnabons.”

“Cindy you have to come to the mall!” I blurted, startling Cindy as she tried to walk past with Natasha.

“W-what? Why?”

“Because Tim and Mikey are going to buy me cinnabons,” I replied, “and Tim said there is a new VRcade that he wants to test to try and become a tinker,” I added as an afterthought.

“Uh... thanks. But maybe next ti-”

“She’d love to go!” said Natasha, pushing Cindy forward.

“What?” exclaimed Cindy, surprised.

“Saturday afternoon at the mall. Hanging out with friends. Classic teen activity.”

“Er, I don’t really know… I was going to-”

“Oh no you don’t! No sitting in your apartment doing laundry or whatever.”

“I wasn’t going to do laundry.”

“Or some other boring thing. You’re done with work for the day girl. Go have fun. Let me live vicariously through you!”

The two argued back and forth a bit, though I recognized it as the same kind of bickering Mikey and Tim might do. Cindy finally gave in and agreed to go, and left to go grab “some stuff” from her apartment. Natasha left to make a late lunch for her kids (parents provide food for their offspring!? Envy), and I informed Mikey that Cindy was coming and we would meet him in the elevator hall.

Cindy arrived shortly, carrying a small bag with many pockets, and wearing different civilian clothes that had less faded symbols (but still wearing her black, elbow-length gloves). We got on the elevator to head to the base.

“So, anything I should know about your friends? They in the business?” asked Cindy.

I looked at her in confusion. Not because of her question, but because her voice wasn’t at all raspy.

“What’s wrong with your voice Cindy?”

“Nothing! This is what it’s normally like!”

“No, it’s normally raspy.”

“It’s…” she sighed and rolled her eyes, “I'd just prefer to make a good first impression.”

“Oh! Is it part of your civilian disguise?”

“Yes! Exactly! That’s what it is.”

“I see. Anyways, to answer your question Mikey also works here. He was with me when you gave me the fire extinguisher, and Tim is his long-time friend. Tim doesn’t know that Mikey works here so just be aware of that. Mikey doesn’t want him to know about this job.”

“What should I call you around Tim then?”

“Tofu.”

“…”

“He thinks Mikey and I work at a warehouse.”

She shook her head, “Kay. Hope you know what you’re doing.”

Admittedly, I had miscalculated in using Tofu as my name when I met Mikey and Tim, but I hadn’t realized at the time that I would be spending more time with them. It didn’t really matter to me so much if Tim found out, but if he did he would find out about Mikey, and that was a large problem for Mikey.

I wonder if I needed another alias to go by? But Tim already knew me as Tofu, as did anyone else I wanted to keep in contact with. A different name wouldn’t serve any purpose at this point, although I might want to start cultivating alternate personas for when this one eventually failed. Something to think about.

We arrived in the elevator hall, where Mikey was already waiting. He was still wearing his domino mask, and seemed a little surprised that Cindy and I weren’t wearing ours in the base. Unlike me, Mikey put his mask on every single time he entered the base, even if he was just passing through.

I made brief introductions since they already knew of each other, then hurried them into the elevator that would take us closest to the mall.

I had a ‘’food court’ to explore.

The mall was huge. It was composed of two large structures, both five stories high and multiple blocks wide. Between the two structures was an avenue designated for pedestrian traffic only, which weaved itself in a zig-zag pattern for multiple blocks, and was covered by a glass ceiling. There were multiple walkways between the two buildings, and if you stood on one near the top you could get a very nice view of the crowds and stores, even if the crowd was a bit thin, and many of the stores were locked up with signs saying: “Closed For Summer.” Mikey and Cindy were consulting a mounted map of the mall, while I munched on a cinnabon and watched the crowds.

Fun fact: cinnabons are just very large donuts, with an organic, bitter powder added to them. Still tasty though.

Mikey and Cindy located the ‘VRcade’ and we headed off, weaving through crowds and moving up and down ‘escalators’ (an absolutely fascinating transportation device). The mall reminded me of my first experience in E13, when Jasper was leading me to Maggie’s. There was a wide variety of both people and stores, although the stores inside the mall tended to be more ‘high-tech’ than the ones outside. One that really intrigued me had strange creatures floating through the air outside the storefront. At first glance they appeared to be made of the same glowing energy as Poena and Frankie’s powers, but civilians walked right through the ‘fish’ to no adverse effect. I wanted to buy one of these ‘holograms’ but balked when I saw the price. For that kind of money I could buy fifty tofu burgers! Absolutely ridiculous!

Speaking of food, there was an amazing arrangement of food

vendors! There was of course the Cinnabon, but there was also a Puzzle's Pretzels (and I learned that each establishment had its own unique shape for the cheezy treats), a 'Smoothie Shack', and a wide variety of 'candy' vendors. Humans have an amazing mastery of arranging sugar into unique forms.

One vendor sold specialty gum that changed flavors over time. Some of them even created swirls of color if you blew a 'bubble' out of them, which Mikey demonstrated for me.

Another vendor sold 'hard candies' that were shaped to look like polished stones. Rock candy, 'lollipops', and something called a 'jawbreaker' as well (which I took to be some kind of challenge until Mikey and Cindy rushed to inform me I wasn't supposed to bite them).

An automated mechanical vendor along one pathway sold something called 'cotton candy', and the machine shaped different colors of the sugary substance into shapes on a stick. One of the shapes available was a 'stick figure' person, which I found confusing. From what I knew about them, humans were quite averse to eating each other, but food in the shape of a human was fine?

There was also a-

"Dude, if we stop for every single candy store we're never gonna get there," said Mikey.

"I'm almost done!"

I hurriedly made my selection and paid for the rest of my candy. There were just so many interesting varieties; I wanted to sample them all.

“Didn’t Sandra tell you to stop wasting your money?” asked Cindy, still without a rasp in her voice. I'd noticed her taking out a small, L-shaped device with a button on top, that she breathed into every now and then when she thought we weren't looking.

“I’m not wasting it. It’s important to sample everything." Just in case one turned out to be useful like the MREs. Besides, the taste of sugar was doing wonders to relieve the stress caused by Poena. Maybe Cindy should eat some, she seemed wound up.

After a few more escalators, we arrived at a storefront that had two large holograms displaying humans in fighting stances. The interior was similar to the arcade on Ashwood St. that I frequented with Mikey and Tim, except that a large number of the arcade machines had attached helmets and visors. I was the first to spot Tim, and we made our way over to him. He was at a machine labeled “Beat Dancer,” wearing a visor that covered his eyes and with his bag of gizmos next to the machine. Mikey had to tap his shoulder to get his attention.

“Hey guys, isn’t this place great? They’ve even got hardlight stuff in the back...” Tim trailed off, noticing Cindy, “Hi there?”

We introduced Cindy to Tim, using our prepared story about her working at the same warehouse.

“Well hey, that works out great,” said Tim, “The hardlight chamber I wanted to try was a four-player.”

He quickly explained his plan, which was essentially to work with his bag of devices while inside the hardlight chamber, but he would need the other three players to continue the game and keep it from ending while he did so. Mikey was hesitant, but Tim "absolutely, positively, guarantee(d)," that nothing would explode this time. Cindy agreed to help as well (not seeming fazed by mention of explosions), and Tim paid for a session in the hardlight chamber. We received (somewhat flimsy) safety gear and blasters from an attendant, as well as a warning to use *only* the blasters during the course of the game, before heading to the designated room.

The game itself involved working as a squad to advance down an endless corridor disguised as an alley. How far you made it down the alley, as well as how many enemies you dispatched with supplied 'blasters', determined your final score. The walls had large screens behind reinforced glass to provide background, the floor was a slowly moving conveyor belt (similar to escalators), and hardlight constructs were used as obstacles. Tim's plan was to assemble and repair items from his bag of devices while inside the chamber, thereby immersing himself in a "tinker mindset" while in a "stressful" situation. Theoretically, this would cause a tinker power awakening.

We spent the next hour playing and keeping the game running while Tim tried to complete some of his practice devices. The conveyor belt didn't extend to the back of the room, so Tim set up there on the floor… at least, after attempting to walk along the conveyor with us, to near-disastrous results when his bag of devices spilled, and nearly dumped device parts into the gaps in the treads. As for Mikey, Cindy, and I, we got to work trying to get as far as we could in the game, which was… interesting. None of us had used a 'blaster' before, and after I figured it out, I had to tone down my aim in order to match Mikey and Cindy. The harder part was whenever an enemy hardlight construct surprised me, and I had to resist the urge to swipe out with a fist or spit bullets at it. In Mikey's case, I *think* he was doing rather well for a normal human, but I didn't have anyone to compare him with. Cindy aimed better than Mikey, even while taking out the small

device and breathing from it, but I could tell she was tired from the Trebla job earlier today; she was much slower than when she trained with Adder and I. Still, that put her performance above Mikey's. I'd need to make sure he kept going to Adder's training sessions, he obviously needed them.

In the end, Tim… did not trigger. Which was a shame. I had been hoping to record data on the event if he did. While the two triggers I had witnessed up until now had no detectable source, I might just not have been set up properly for detection at the time. Plus, even if detecting the source was impossible, gathering data on the circumstances of the trigger would be valuable. The two triggers I had witnessed so far had been life-or-death combat situations, but I had read about people who gained them differently. Tim was more than willing to answer my questions, and Mikey eventually had to interrupt our conversation, suggesting that we go get some food.

At the food court!

The impressive plethora of snack stalls and candy shops on our way to the arcade had apparently *not* been the food court. Which made the real thing all that more impressive.

It was the smell that reached me first. Sizzling oil, frying vegetables, spilled sugary drinks, humans, multiple varieties of grease, and even the smell of cooking meat combined into a wonderful aroma that permeated even the large open space in front of me. Food vendors of every description were arranged along the walls, with empty tables spread all around the room to provide places to sit and eat.

I… I didn't know where to start.

The others picked out a table at random, and we divided to go pick out our individual choices. Mikey followed Cindy, while I went with Tim, both because Tim was paying for me, and because I didn't know what to try first. He led me to a stall marked "Tongue Thai'd," from which I smelled the distinctive scent of boiling vegetable oil. I ordered a serving of something labeled garlic noodles, and moved back with Tim to wait for our orders.

"It's a shame the plan didn't work," I said, to get a conversation going. I was eager to discuss powers again.

He sighed and adjusted his glasses, "Yeah, but I'm starting to think Mikey's right. I might just be wasting my time."

I frowned, "What makes you say that?"

"Well, I've been trying to get a power since I was ten. If I was going to get a power I would probably have gotten it by now right? Maybe it *is* completely random."

It wasn't, at least not completely. Of that at least I was sure. Both trigger events I had witnessed so far had been in response to life threatening situations, and there were sufficient records to indicate that was a common cause of power awakenings. Some might be random, but more likely, it was that the correct stimulus needed for power activation was difficult to achieve. No reason for Tim to give up yet.

"How many Odd Summers have there been since you were ten?" I asked.

"What? Uh, the one three years ago, and the one five years before

that, when I was ten. You know that."

Sure I did. Note to self: look up more historical records.

"That's what I'm saying!" I continued, "This is only the third Odd Summer since you started trying, and it's barely started. Plus, it's not like the experiments when you were ten had much of a chance of success."

"Hey! I had a pretty good idea what I was-"

"Mikey told me about the waffle iron," I interrupted.

"Ah, heh…"

"My point is, it's much too early to give up now. Setbacks happen sometimes, you just gotta keep a steady pace on it. In fact I already have the next idea to try."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Most trigger cases are because someone is in danger right? But a simulator won't give you that. You need something with real stakes."

"Uhhh, you think I should put myself in danger?"

"No no, but if, say, we did the Alley Run again, but this time we made a bet, with real stakes, then there would be an actual consequence for the outcome. We would be closer to simulating the actual circumstances of a trigger."

"I see… that does make sense… and if we…" he mumbled a bit, staring at the floor, before looking back up to me, "And I'm guessing the stakes would involve somehow paying for food?"

"Now you're getting it," I confirmed.

Tim laughed, “Alright, I wanted to give Alley Run a try myself anyways. Whoever scores the most then.”

Success. I’m glad I was able to convince Tim to keep trying. Right now he's my main source of power research. And winning a game of Alley Run? Easiest meal ever.

We grabbed our meals when they were ready (garlic noodles smelled tasty), and sat at the table we picked out. Mikey and Cindy joined us with their own meals, and from that point on we just ‘hung out’, chatting about whatever topic came to mind. It was nice, just sitting and eating with ‘friends’. I could see why Natasha had called this a "classic teen activity.”

I had finished my meal, and I was debating going back for seconds when my phone rang, and Cindy’s, and Tim’s, and Mikey’s…

And, in fact, every single phone on every single person at the mall.

The ring tones had changed, to a uniform sound that sounded like an alarm. When I checked my phone the message [Assault On The Wall: Seek Shelter] was displayed.

I remembered this. In the school’s safety assembly they had informed us of this possibility, and had given us the locations of several shelters to seek out if we couldn’t find our own. That wasn’t good at all. I stood up and grabbed my bag of candy, but was surprised when no one else stood up. In fact, they were looking at me with amused expressions.

“Where you going man?” asked Mikey, with a smirk.

“To a shelter? They gave us the info at school.”

“Just give it a moment.”

I didn’t really want to waste time, but admittedly few people had reacted to the alarm. The only people who even looked concerned were several elderly looking humans. We waited thirty-four seconds before the phones went off again, but with a less alarming ring-tone. The message [Disregard Previous Warning: False Alarm] was displayed. I sat back down, feigning embarrassment to fit the social situation. I guess this was normal?

“First Wandergheist warning?” asked Tim.

“Wandergheist warning?”

“Wandergheist sets off the wall defenses every couple of weeks. All the sectors close to it get buzzed.”

“I see. That sounds… annoying?” Such an important alarm going off all the time was definitely some kind of safety hazard.

“You should’ve been here when it first started," said Mikey, "It used to send all the nearby sectors into automatic lock-down, before they figured out how to make it just a text alert. *That* was fun for the three months it happened.”

“Huh, and nobody has stopped him?”

Mikey gave me a funny look, “Dude, it’s Wandergheist. What are they supposed to do?”

Oops. I didn't actually know what Wandergheists abilities were. Apparently Wandergheist was a big enough deal that he is common knowledge. Knowledge I was still piecing together one tidbit at a time. Luckily Tim stepped in, and directed the conversation away from my ignorance.

"Actually the NE15 heroes have been working on a solution to that," said Tim, "They've got an idea using physical traps. Here, I've got the article on my phone…"

Tim's explanation and a quick (and discreet) search on my phone filled in the details about Wandergheist. First off, I had been wrong in thinking it was a cowl. It was supposedly some kind of powered animal, in possession of an incredible ability called a 'null field'. Inside a specific radius around the creature, most forms of energy transfer would fail, including combustion, electric currents, and even nuclear power, but the most incredible facet was that super powers would be rendered unusable. Activated powers would refuse to work, and passive powers would simply stop functioning. On top of that, the effective radius of Wandergheist's power was assumed to be nearly half a city block, a ridiculously wide range which was the reason it set off the wall alarms; the automatic defenses thought the sudden lack of power caused by Wandergheist was a breach in the wall. An utterly unfair ability, but I was confused as to why a mutant or other non-powered method would fail in removing the organism. I clicked a link to show me a picture of it...

...

...

...beautiful.

It was a long-range picture, that displayed a humanoid creature with skin so black it appeared to be absorbing the light around it. It stood

on two legs, but I could tell from the shape of its limbs that it would be just as comfortable on all-fours. Its legs used a reversed knee joint similar to my favored combat form, and its arms were long with clawed 'hands' at the end, but the absolutely perfect ratios of the limbs, and the precise musculature that I could barely make out put my primitive designs to shame. Even its head was a perfect ovaloid shape designed to deflect and absorb impacts, while giving its six eyes an excellent detection range (two in the front for binocular vision, four on the sides for wide angle detection). The only design flaw I could detect was two segmented tendrils that emerged from the back of its head and draped down its back.

I clicked through several more pictures, confirming that it was four meters tall, and much stronger than even its perfect musculature would imply. In one picture it was casually plucking the wheels off a derelict car in the same way I might pull off a normal human's fingers. In another it was snapping an armored mutant male in two, while a squad of mutants dressed in military gear tried unsuccessfully (and laughably) to pin it down with primitive weapons. I actually found a video of that fight, and almost despaired when I realized its combat style matched Adder's, with only slight variations to account for frame. Even the tendrils I thought a weakness weren't; they latched onto its own spine at different locations, and if I was analyzing the design right, they were some form of high-speed signal transfer. At several points in the fight they disconnected and reconnected at will to different sections of its spine, each time creating an optimum distance for transferring signals to the limbs it was using. Maybe its spine was used for something else? Either way the system worked, its limbs moved blazingly fast if the tendrils were latched near them.

Superior design...

Jealousy.

I recorded whatever I could glean from the images. Both its design and movements were valuable information, and I recorded even the grainier images. There was also the abundance of plants in the background of the pictures, which was an interesting detail… I guess…

Sigh. With its ability to nullify supers, and unparalleled physical prowess, such a creature would destroy me easily. Not to mention that it probably had other tricks up its sleeve. It had apparently been patrolling the area around southern California for years now, and not sustaining a single permanent injury in that time was telling. Humans were tenacious; I doubted it had been entirely successful in avoiding injury (Maybe it had regeneration? Likely). At least it was stuck outside Fortress City's wall where it couldn't reach me… Sigh.

I added it to the list of entities to avoid ever challenging, along with Hellion, 'God', and Mikey's gran-mama.

"I think it's space whales," said Mikey, confidently.

"Pfft what? It's obviously a dimensional overlap," countered Tim.

My attention turned back to the conversation. While I had been absorbed with learning about Wandergheist, the conversation had apparently shifted towards where powers came from.

"Dude, what even *is* a dimensional overlap?" asked Mikey.

"It's where two dimensions get superimposed on each other, and rules from both start applying. Several supers have powers that are *verified* to use the concept, and Dr. Vilgrad wrote a paper about it

back in 2098! He talked about an energy wave that propagates at the speed of 4D space when two hypermassive objects collide, which in *layman's* terms means powers are the result of two dimensions crashing into each other! If you applied Cecil's theory on supreme receivers, you could theoretically read the wavelength of the energy wave like a library, and just pick and choose whatever power you wanted!" finished Tim, nearly out of breath.

Mikey and Cindy had blank looks on their faces, and I adopted one too to stare at Tim.

"***Or***," Mikey finally said, "It's magic space whales."

"Argh!" exclaimed Tim, grabbing his head dramatically. Then he turned to Cindy and I, "Can you believe this guy?"

Cindy chuckled, "Sorry Tim. Magic space whales sounds as plausible as anything else."

"Ugh. Tofu! Tofu please, tell me you don't believe in the magic space whales!" pleaded Tim.

"Um, I don't currently have enough evidence to either confirm or deny magic space whales."

Mikey and Cindy laughed, and Tim decided to settle his argument with Mikey by flicking a spoonful of rice at him. Things devolved into a small food fight, which I unfortunately couldn't participate in since I had finished my meal, but I managed to snag a few pieces of food when no one was looking, so that was good. Hanging out with friends at the mall was quickly proving to be one of my favorite activities. I should invite friends on outings more often...

... Just needed to figure out how to sneak a twenty ton scorpion into

the mall.

Ch31 Refried

“Dude! This is insane!” exclaimed Tim.

“It is indeed ‘insane’,” I agreed. I was lying, but agreeing in this situation was the proper social response.

Tim had received a notification while we were eating, from one of his ‘webzines’, one that specialized in hero information for the “outer east sectors.” Apparently it was a ‘fan publication’ that Tim used frequently, to keep abreast of new information about the heroes of E13 and the surrounding sectors. I had him link me the address; it sounded wonderfully useful.

The notification had been due to an update on the villain Trebla’s ‘blog’. The footage of his fight vs the heroes earlier today had been posted shortly after the fight had concluded, but the notification that alerted Tim was due to the second video to be posted on the site: Ifrit's and my fight with the sidekicks. The four of us were now huddled around his phone to watch, although Cindy and I for different reasons than entertainment. I was just keeping up appearances of being an “interested teenager,” while Cindy… looked a bit pale and worried, actually. Hopefully there was nothing in the video that would give away her ‘civilian identity’. It would cast suspicion on Mikey and I to be working with a “powered” criminal… although I doubted Tim would suspect his best friend. The “best friend” designation seemed to give a lot of leeway on social issues; Mikey and Tim often traded insults, but treated them as if they were telling jokes.

“Aw dammit. That’s Jennifer,” said Tim, his excitement over the video suddenly subdued.

“Jennifer?” asked Cindy.

“The girl with the glowy weapons. She went to our school,” said Tim.

Mikey elbowed Tim in the ribs, “Dude not so loud, and don’t go blurting that everywhere.”

Tim elbowed him back before saying, “She’s already out jeez, she triggered in the middle of her fencing match; everybody saw.”

“Still man, you never know how far it’s spread. Some idiots might not even think to check until they hear a rumor. If the wrong person hears...”

“I think she’ll be fine, look at her,” said Tim, pointing at the screen.

Poena (or Jennifer Heartly as it were) was indeed doing fine for most of the fight, although that was mostly because we hadn’t been aiming to kill her. She, however, was taking full advantage of the fact that her power didn’t kill, and on the screen she stabbed Ifrit, which set off the explosion (with appropriate exclamations of surprise coming from Mikey and Tim), and from there things went more or less fine, with only the minor hiccup of having Human.exe forcibly shut down. I was glad to see that even with Human.exe shut down, my actions didn’t look *too* weird from an outside perspective.

...Right up until I glanced at the others. Tim was staring at the screen with his eyes wide and mouth open, and Mikey was doing the same except he was looking at me instead of the video. Sigh, that was going to be a conversation later. And why was Cindy staring at me too? She was there! She saw most of it first hand!

I reviewed what I remembered from the fight. Sure, I used a lot of tendrils trying to grapple the shifter, and in a couple spots my limbs bent unnaturally, but that was normal for a shapeshifter, right? And I hadn’t permanently injured anyone! A few broken bones maybe, but bones were nothing; bones healed easy.

“Wow,” exclaimed Tim, finally breaking out of his daze. “I… can’t decide if that was terrible, or karmic justice.”

Mikey and Cindy turned their stares to Tim, before Mikey snorted and patted Tim’s shoulder. “Definitely a bit of both dude.”

“Karmic justice? Am I missing something?” asked Cindy.

Tim and Mikey explained their less than pleasant experiences with Jennifer to Cindy, whereupon Cindy got a thoughtful look on her face before asking, “Jennifer… Heartly?”

“Yup, that’s her,” confirmed Tim, “You know her?”

“ I remember her. She was a grade-A bitch back in middle school,” said Cindy.

“Well, not much changed,” confirmed Mikey.

“True evil is timeless, unless you throw it in a volcano,” said Tim, looking up at the roof as he stroked his chin. I didn’t understand what he meant, but it must have been a joke of some sort because both Mikey and Cindy snickered at it.

We finished our meal, and Tim tried to suggest our plan for Alley Run, but it seemed both Mikey and Cindy weren’t up for it. Mikey had been moving boxes all day, and Cindy had of course been fighting the sidekicks with me, although we didn’t say as much. We settled on instead trying some of the other games at the VRcade, stuff that required less walking. Seems they also had a few non-VR games like Gribblins n’ Ghouls.

I was discussing Gribblin Tamer with Tim on the way back to the VRcade. Strangely enough he didn’t play Gribblin Tamer himself, claiming that he didn’t like touch screen controls, but there was apparently a ‘console attachment’ you could buy that turned your

phone into a true portable console, as well as providing access to a wider variety of games. He pulled his out of his device bag, and showed me how it worked. I wanted one, and Tim said I could buy them at the mall, but they were *expensive*. I looked regretfully at the bag of candy I was carrying. I… may have spent too much on snacks lately. Hopefully the money for the Trebla job came in soon.

I was still getting used to the fact that there were things of worth besides food, weapons, and allies. At this point, I had satisfied most of my survival needs; I had allied with a powerful faction, I had made large strides in improving my combat utility, and I had stockpiled enough energy that I was no longer watching my reserves constantly.

> Mass at 298% norm.
>
> Energy reserves = 25 days continued operation.

Humans pursued objectives that weren't survival based once all their needs were being met. I didn't have an interest in most of them; 'Careers', 'sex', and 'drugs' were all irrelevant to me. Scientific pursuits were useful *and* interesting, but considering the massive headstart humans had, it was more efficient to leave that to scientists and tinkers. For now I would simply continue my research into video games. I had seen them as a way to train for possible scenarios, but humans saw them almost entirely as entertainment, so it was a good starting point to bridge the gap between our ways of thinking. I'd need to divert a few more resources to this goal, instead of funneling everything into acquiring fuel.

Still, candy was pretty great.

I picked a piece of 'rock candy' out of my bag, and ate it slowly. If I

mixed a few small flakes of metal in with the candy, it made a strangely satisfying, metallic-sounding screech against my teeth when I crunched down on it. I crunched through a few more pieces of candy, but was then startled when some organic screeches coming from the mall were added to the cacophony in my mouth. The others also noticed, and we moved to the banister that separated the walkway from a multi-story drop.

Below us, a swarm of rats was emerging from one of the stores on the bottom floor. They were in pursuit of a small crowd of people, and after a few moments an evacuation warning announcing a rat swarm was broadcasted over the mall's PA system. Strangely, I noticed several humans did not heed the warning until they saw the rat swarm themselves.

"Whoa, I've never seen a swarm that big before," said Tim. I had to agree; I saw sixty-five rats down there and counting.

"And in broad daylight? They must be desperate," replied Mikey.

Indeed, the swarm was acting strangely. In my experience they hated bright lights, and would attempt to single out a weak target to gang up on using their superior numbers. The rats below were attacking more like individuals than a group, simply picking the closest targets to themselves and rushing them. Even stranger was that the rats were ignoring some easy targets in favor of targeting some of the larger mutants in the crowd. Utterly bizarre, why would they target a seven foot tall mutant with spiked ridges on his arms instead of a three foot tall normal child?

"Jeezus, what the hell are they doing?" exclaimed Mikey, "I've never seen them this riled up before."

"S-should we call nine-one-one?" asked Tim unsteadily.

“They’re already on their way if they announced an evacuation,” said Cindy. She was tapping the banister while scowling down at the swarm.

“We should get going as well,” I said, beginning to herd them away from the banister and towards the nearest exit. Seriously, humans never seemed to react quite as fast as I would like them to.

The next exit was located a few stores down, and we turned into a hallway that led to elevators and stairs. On some floors the hallways would also lead to a bridge that connected to surrounding buildings, but there wasn’t one on this floor. We were heading for the stairs when one of the elevators ahead of us **dinged** and opened.

And out fell a huge rat. It wasn’t as big as the one that had chased me in the sewer, not by half, but it had barely fit into the elevator. And its face was *wrong*. Stitches turned its face into a mash of features, and its fur had been removed in other places to allow for larger stitchwork along its spine. Inefficient and sloppy stitchwork. Its muscles were being pulled at bad angles which made its movement stiff and jerky. It sort of gave the impression that it was wearing a rat disguise. A bad one.

> Inferior design.
>
> Estimated threat: low.

I wouldn’t bet my bag of candy that this rat was made by whoever made the bioweapons, but if I did, I’d feel confident in my bet.

“Uh, um, that, uh…” sputtered Tim, who had frozen at the sight of it.

“That’s a huge fucking rat,” said Mikey.

Eh, it was big. But I’d seen bigger. More importantly was how to handle this situation. Killing this thing would be easy for me or Cindy, but we couldn’t do so in front of Tim without compromising our civilian identities. Maybe Cindy could lead Tim and Mikey out of the mall while I handled the rat? Or maybe I could kill it while Tim wasn’t looking.

The rat decided for me. After it settled itself into a better stance it sniffed the air, and its gaze slowly drifted over to us, before locking onto Cindy. Damn, I had detected that Cindy was a mutant through smell myself, and it seemed the rat was able to determine that as well. Seems this swarm really was targeting mutants.

“Yeah, that doesn’t look friendly,” said Mikey.

“It’s not. We should start running,” I confirmed. Running would buy me time to figure out how to kill this thing without Tim seeing me do it.

It still took a moment to snap Mikey and Tim out of whatever daze they were experiencing, but the rat let out a broken **skrre-eek** and that got them all running at top speed. We ran back out of the elevator hall and turned back towards the food court, the large rat lumbering right behind us.

Around us, other parts of the mall were starting to get a bit chaotic. The rat following us wasn’t the only large one, and while the larger mutants were fending off the small rats decently well, the big ones gave them trouble. There were also plenty of mutants with only minor mutations, such as extra eyes or limbs, who were no good at

combat. A couple people being attacked by rats looked completely normal, but I suspected they had less visible mutations, similar to Cindy.

Our feet pounded the floor as we ran ahead of the stitched rat, but I was already noticing a problem. Tim was no good at running, and Mikey and Cindy were both starting to flag below their maximum speeds, still tired from the long day of activity. The rat wasn't fast in comparison to the non-stitched variety, but it was still fast enough to keep up with us even if it couldn't reach us. I made sure I was at the back of the group to intercept it just in case.

We arrived at the food court, which in the short amount of time we had been away, had devolved into utter chaos. Rats were attacking any mutants they saw, as well as ransacking the food stands. Seems whatever had been done to them couldn't completely override their instincts.

This was less than ideal. There was an exit from the mall at the back of the food court, but we would have to traverse the entirety of the food court to get there. Easily done if the goal was to stay alive, but I also did not want to compromise our civilian identities, nor let Tim and Mikey get injured.

The large stitched rat arrived behind us, skidding to a halt in confusion at all the noise and activity, and we were forced to enter the food court to keep away from it. Mikey grabbed an abandoned food tray and flung it at the rat to buy time. In its diminished capacity I doubted it even registered the hit, but the food on the tray distracted it.

"Where… **gasp**… should we go?" asked Tim.

“Back of the food court, grab anything you can to fight with,” I replied.

“And dude, drop the duffel,” added Mikey. Tim had been running with the heavy, device filled bag.

“No way... **gasp**... it took too long to get all... **gasp**... of these,” replied Tim.

I grabbed the bag from him since it wouldn’t hinder me, and we began traversing the food court quickly. Unfortunately there wasn’t much on hand to use as weapons besides food trays, although they were better than using one of my knives since I could use them to bat rats away. Cindy began knocking rats off anyone we passed, and Mikey and I followed suit. It was a good idea since the mutants would join our group and made a good meat shield. The larger rat was still following behind us slowly, and I made sure to chuck food at it whenever possible to distract it. Whoever it was that modified the rats had certainly made them a lot dumber; the originals would never have fallen for such an obvious deception (although, the originals would probably have just taken the food and run to begin with).

We got closer and closer to the exit, but the rats were starting to cluster around us; there were simply too many mutants in one spot for them to ignore, and despite how stupid they were acting there was still a lot of them. We needed a way to split the growing swarm.

I smacked a rat away as it leapt at Cindy. The rats were still intent on only attacking mutants, and they ignored Mikey, Tim, and I completely, only attacking us if we were between them and one of the mutants. The rats were attacking mutants with no visible signs of mutations, so their primary form of tracking was probably smell...

I formulated a plan and stuck my hand into Tim’s bag of devices. My

palm began to rapidly swell as I flooded it with blood and micro units, forming a large pustule that I could wrap my fingers around. I spent energy and sped up my micro units to quickly change the blood stored inside, and had the 'skin' covering it change to a gray, metallic looking color. Next, I separated the bulbous orb from the rest of my hand, leaving it with only a thin cord of nerves to continue transmitting to the micro units and prevent it from degrading too soon. Then I checked to make sure Tim wasn't looking, and removed my hand from the bag to chuck the orb to the side. To any onlookers it should look like I threw an object I found in his bag.

The surface layer of the orb quickly began to break down, releasing the contents: a mixture of liquids and gases meant to simulate the smells of the various mutant samples I had accumulated over the past weeks, as well as whatever I thought would smell appetizing. The orb went rolling over the floor, its ruptured surface leaking the aromatic substance behind it as it went. Until the micro units self-destructed a few seconds from now, it would smell like an incredibly pungent mutant mixed with the smell of grilled tofu.

The rats went *nuts*.

Half of the swarm closest to the orb immediately chased it down, while the other half of the swarm tried to run *through* our group to get to it once they determined we weren't the source of the smell. Some of the rats stayed with us, but most of them were now in a frenzied pile trying to reach the smell's source.

"What the hell's got into them?" said a large mutant in front of me (this one had horns that curled around the sides of his head for extra protection).

"Who cares? Let's get out of here," I replied to his likely rhetorical

query. Why let them question a good thing?

The group ran for the exit, and the larger mutant with the horns reached the doors first, slamming one open so hard the glass broke. He didn't get very far before I heard shouts from outside the mall, demanding "Get down on the ground!" and "Don't move!"

Outside the mall was a wide open space, meant to be an outdoor eating area if the tables and benches were anything to go by. A small squad of police had been heading for the doors before we burst out, and they were now aiming guns at the mutant who had broken the door. Upon seeing them the mutant had fallen flat to the ground, yelling "My armbands got torn! My armbands got torn!"

Indeed, both the sleeves of his shirt and his arms themselves were quite torn up from the rats, and if he had had armbands they weren't there anymore. Luckily for him the police ignored him once they saw the crowd that followed him out of the mall, and they quickly switched to helping evacuate the injured to a corner of the empty eating area. That only changed when the sound of crunching glass came from the mall, and I turned to see the large, stitched rat stupidly breaking through another glass door, ignoring the already open one.

"What the hell?" said one of the officers.

"That's one of the rats!" said an alarmed civilian, and sounds of dismay and alarm rose up from the crowd of people who had escaped the mall.

"That's a rat!?" exclaimed the officer.

The police quickly formed a barrier between the rat and the civilians, yelling a few times for it to cease and desist before opening fire (I guess on the off chance it was a mutant?). Whatever modifications the rat might have had, being bullet-proof was not one of them, and it quickly fell to the hail of gunfire along with any of the other rats that followed it out. When it was over, two of the police returned to helping the civilians, and the rest entered the mall as a squad.

Medical personnel showed up soon after, and started sending people home after checking them out. My group of friends hadn't received any injuries, and we were soon ok'd to leave after one of the cops had a thorough look through Tim's bag of devices. Everyone was unusually quiet as we walked home. Finally Tim spoke up.

"That… was pretty gnarly."

"...Yeah," said Mikey, apparently too tired to keep the conversation going.

"I wasn't the only one who saw the stitches right?" asked Tim.

"They were obvious on the big one," I confirmed, "but all the rats I saw had them."

"That was so weird. Do you think they were being controlled? What am I saying, they were totally being controlled. Like zombies! And the big one! I've never seen one that big before. Think a power made it grow?"

"No, I've seen bigger rats. Most likely the person responsible only caused the stitches and odd behavior."

"Bigger rats? Bullshit!"

The conversation returned to "normal" after that, Tim and I arguing over the maximum possible size of sewer-dwelling pack rats. Mikey

chimed in occasionally, but Cindy had grown silent again. I had seen a rat knock her breathing apparatus out of her 'purse' during the melee, but hadn't been able to help retrieve it due to the situation. Likely her voice had returned to normal by now.

We eventually reached the point where we had to split up to go our separate ways. Mikey and Tim headed west down Ashwood St. after saying goodbye, and Cindy covered up her raspy farewell by fake coughing immediately after (I'd have to remember that tactic).

We headed in the direction of our apartment building, but the moment Mikey and Tim were out of earshot she pulled out her phone in a hurry, talking out loud as she did so.

"Need to call Sandra. Those rats were only targeting mutants; this has Espada written all over it!"

"Um…" I was rather doubtful that the Espada were responsible, considering they were all dead. I hesitated on what to say, but finally settled on, "Those rats weren't just attacking, they were capturing."

She paused and turned to me, "What?"

"I saw several mutants pulled away by large groups of rats. That doesn't seem like the Espada's normal operating procedure."

"That's even worse!" she exclaimed, and finished punching in Sandra's number. There was a frenzied conversation, of which I only heard Cindy's side, followed by Cindy putting the call on "speaker phone" so I could discuss what details I remembered with them. I gave an estimate on the size and capabilities of the swarm to her, as well as how many mutants I believed were captured.

"Alright," said Sandra, "I want you both to head back to base immediately. If the Espada are trying something I don't want you out and about."

“What about the people at the mall?’ asked Cindy.

“Sorry hun, we’re going to need to leave that to the C's. I don’t have anyone that can tackle that right now.”

“But Sandra…”

“I’m sorry, but the only cowls we have available right now are Imp and your mother. I can’t ask the day-to-day employees for something like this.”

“I could probably track them,” I offered.

“Absolutely not," replied Sandra, "The tunnels aren’t safe, doubly so if the Espada are trying something."

“I’m reasonably certain I can handle it. I go down there all the time.”

“... and just why are you going down there when I expressly told you not to?”

“You didn’t say not to go into them. You said I shouldn’t *live* in them.”

“...Tofu... that’s... **argh**!” I heard some muffled exclamations that I couldn’t make out, although I did hear Lily laughing in the background. Finally Sandra continued.

“Tofu... We are going to have a talk about this when you get back.”

Dang it.

Cindy's apartment door **thunked** closed behind her. Her purse was abandoned by the door, and shoes quickly discarded. Then she dragged herself to her room before flopping face first into her bed, exhausted. She technically had things to do still, laundry among them (*dangit Natasha*), but she firmly decided to put them off until tomorrow.

What a day.

Sleep sounded good right now, but she was just too wired to close her eyes. Images of the day's events kept flitting past her eyelids when she tried, and she rolled over to instead stare at the ceiling.

Probably shouldn't have used the inhaler either; I'm going to have such a headache later, and now I need to bug Socket for a new one. Stupid rats. Stupid Espada.

They couldn't even give her one afternoon. One afternoon to feel like a normal person. She raised one gloved arm and stared at it. Then she peeled off the black glove revealing… another black glove, or at least what looked like one. Her hands, from the tips of her fingers to just below the elbow, were encased in an inky black covering. Not quite chitin and not quite skin, the rubbery texture and color made it look like she had dipped her arms in tar. The only change in color was the two glands embedded into each wrist, looking like purple and yellow bruises if you didn't know better. If she flexed the right combination of muscles, the glands would release their contents into a chamber in her hands, mixing and creating a napalm-like substance that was then ejected from a hole in the center of her palms.

Organic flamethrowers. Cindy wasn't sure what esoteric situation could have caused her father to mutate in this specific fashion, but it

was the only “gift” the absentee parent had ever given her. One that was admittedly strong enough to let her contend with supers, even if she wasn’t one herself.

*And now Jennifer Heartly **is**.*

“**Argh**!” she punched a nearby pillow.

What a wonderful reminder that was. Cindy had almost managed to forget the names of the kids who had bullied her in middle school. Heartly hadn’t been the absolute worst of those bullies, but she had made Cindy’s life miserable. It had resulted in being transferred to a highschool on the other end of the sector, and the gloves, and begging Socket to make her the inhaler, and her drive to finish her credits and graduate high school as early as possible. In the end, she had an exemplary academic record, was in excellent physical condition (thanks to Adder’s training), and had a natural-born ability that could keep up with supers. Plus, she had found a new drive to join her mother’s company. Being around her mother’s employees had made her feel… accepted, if not normal. Graduating early gave her time to train with her mom’s employees (and knock out a few college credits on the side), and when she turned eighteen she signed up officially. She was under no illusions that her mother’s company wasn’t a criminal organisation, but she could still do a lot of good here. Hellion’s Henchmen was a boon to E13, and fuck anyone who said otherwise.

Cindy sighed, then rolled until she flopped out of her bed. If she couldn’t sleep she might as well get *something* done. She grabbed her hamper and exited to the hall, intent on laundry. Reaching the dry-scrubber in a small alcove off the hall, she opened the lid and started dumping her clothes in, only taking a moment to make sure each item wasn’t *too* bunched up. The task was unfortunately not

distracting enough, and her thoughts turned again to… Poena.

Of course she got a power. And if what Tim said about the fencing match was right, she barely got it two weeks ago! I had to train every day for ***months*** *before mother would even consider letting me go on a job. Dammit! Should have let Tofu stab her, those spears fucking* ***hurt****.*

And then she had needed to be rescued by Tofu, who somehow took one of those spears and kept right on chugging. She would have felt jealous, Tofu had been showing her up almost from the moment he joined, but it was obvious that he had put in the work to obtain his results. Sure, he had an excellent, versatile power (that was just dropped into his lap by definition), but that didn't automatically make you good at fighting, and Tofu was *good*. His form had been rather bad when he started training with Adder, but he still had a fighter's instincts, and had already caught up to Cindy (and didn't that just salt the injury to her pride). Still, his power didn't give him pain tolerance as far as she knew, and when she remembered the spear he had been hit by… she shivered. Pain tolerance. Went gaga for simple things like candy. Didn't know what a freaking *potted plant* was. Was willing to kill (and had). Wherever Tofu had come from, it probably hadn't been a nice place.

Which made it all the more incredulous that he somehow had such normal friends! Mikey was in the business sure, but both Tim and he were just about as normal as you could get. Spending the evening at the arcade, and discussing everything from where powers came from, to the most recent Mega-B00t album (damn did Mikey have bad taste in music), had probably been the most fun afternoon Cindy had had in recent memory. The rats might have cut it short, but they'd exchanged numbers with the promise that they'd invite her again, which she was excited for. She hadn't made many friends in highschool (or any), and a super villain organization wasn't exactly the easiest place to find friends your own age, so the three new entries on her contacts list were cause for celebration.

Cindy finished loading up the dry-scrubber, then smirked. *And I got to witness Jennifer's long-coming beatdown. That thrashing was epic; karmic justice indeed.* Maybe now she could finally put that part of her past behind her...

…

…

… nah. Next time she saw Poena, she was setting her on fire.

Ch32 Dinner Bell

I don't have the same standards for danger that humans have. A human would look at, say, a swarm of twenty rats, and see impending death. Whereas I would see combat practice, followed by a large lunch (at least, if I wasn't previously cut in half and low on resources). Only a threat to my core mattered, and rats don't exactly use guns, or have lightning powers, although I'd be in trouble if they ate my core; I'd seen them eat rocks on purpose. Nevertheless, I had plenty of resources and much more experience now. I wouldn't be caught off-guard by rats again.

Which is why I thought Sandra was overreacting.

"What do you mean you were chased by rats?!" yelled Sandra. I had been trying to explain why I felt safe in using the sewers. Obviously I had taken the wrong approach.

"It happened after I escaped Magenta. I had to be rescued that time, but other than that I've never been in danger in the sewer."

"The job last week? Why am I only hearing about this now!? Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I told Mikey."

"I meant a lieutenant!"

"Nobody asked."

"Tofu, that..." she took a deep breath and let out a long sigh, rubbing her temples as she did so. Then she faced me and said, "How have you liked being a part of Hellion's Henchmen so far?"

This was a sudden topic shift. "I've liked it a lot."

"So I can assume you plan to stay with us?"

“Yes, definitely.”

“Great to hear. Then there is just one thing I’d like to go over with you.” She folded her arms on the desk and leaned forward. “As you might have guessed, Hellion’s Henchmen is a bit different from other villainous organizations. Both in how we operate, and in temperament. To date, we’ve been in operation for over fifteen years, when most similar enterprizes last two to three at most.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Thank you. Would you like to know the secret to our success?”

“Yes please.”

She grinned and leaned in further. “Teamwork. Simple as that.”

“It doesn’t seem very simple. I’ve found it to be rather complicated myself.”

She laughed, “Well, I meant teamwork as in a goal we aim for, but thank you for recognizing the minutia. Keeping so many personalities and experience levels organized is admittedly a full-time job for me and my staff. That’s part of the reason we have separate teams; keeps people who cooperate well together, and abrasive personalities separate.”

“I see… have I been abrasive?”

“Pfft no, that’s not why I brought this up. You’ve actually been contributing a lot so far, and we’re glad to have you on the team. The point I’m worried about, is that you seem to have a penchant for getting into trouble, and then you try to solve it by yourself, without asking for help. Part of a team is that everyone contributes to the group, but another is that the group looks out for its individual members. The next time you find yourself in one of these situations talk to us. We can make sure you have proper backup, or at the very least, help prevent the problem from happening again. Alright?”

“Alright, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Then I’ll let you go. And… what you do on your own time is

your business, but if you go into the tunnels take some backup okay? And not just your friend Mikey! If it's really that important then you can ask one of our lieutenants, someone with experience. There's worse than rats down there."

"Okay Sandra."

I made it back to my apartment rather late, and decided to go to 'sleep' after fixing myself a snack of sugar and leftover burger buns. Normally I could keep Human.exe going for days if I needed to, but Poena's power had definitely caused some premature fatigue build-up. I suppose I could just continue on without Human.exe, since I had enough resources to avoid torpor, but why bother? To do so would just be an inefficient use of resources, to no immediate benefit; better to sleep.

I placed a few sheets of paper that Sandra had given me on the kitchen counter for later. She gave me 'after-action reports' to fill out and return. Strangely, she seemed concerned that I wouldn't be able to read and understand them, but I assured her I would be fine. Admittedly my understanding of written words had been substandard when I first interviewed with Sandra, but I'd had an entire week of school with which to learn reading and writing since then.

I crawled under my bed, but took a few moments to consider what Sandra had said about HH's goals. My understanding of being part of a faction was that the individual benefits were provided because it suited the faction. I received a helmet and suit from HH because protecting its members from death was important to the group's strength. I received food and money because that was a requirement

to keep me hired. But Sandra was saying that the overall goal of the group was also to specifically look out for individual members? That was like… me looking out for an individual micro unit, or cell. It didn't really make sense… but it almost did? Bleh, I definitely needed to shut down Human.exe for a few hours. I wouldn't figure this out without Human.exe, but it was obviously beginning to malfunction again. It had been a long day.

Human.exe shutdown;

Compiling results…

The next day was Sunday, and there wasn't any work, so while I woke myself up promptly at 5:00am, I stayed under my bed until 5:30am to go over everything that had happened yesterday. Three things concerned me: Trebla's concept of "living is not surviving," Sandra's concept of "the group cares about its members," and the general human concept of "entertainment." Of these three concepts, the only one I could claim to understand was entertainment. When a human was acquiring everything it needed to survive in excess, it then switched to a form of proactive improvement. The Alley Run hardlight chamber from yesterday was a perfect example of this; it tested both reactive reflexes, and endurance, while presenting the 'players' with the unlikely scenario of having guns, and enemy targets that wandered out of cover. While the odds of such a scenario were low, if it ever did happen, we would now be ready for it. Human entertainment covered a wide spectrum of unlikely, but possible, scenarios, a quality I found most admirable.

As for Sandra's and Trebla's concepts… nope, I wasn't really getting it. I felt like I could *almost* grasp Sandra's concept, if I put it in terms of individuals working together for a goal they all wanted, but an entire group looking out for a singular person? In a way that wasn't just to retain a valuable member? Too strange. But then, HH supplied lawyers to even its non-powered members… aspects of this concept made some sense, so I'd keep it on the back-burner for now.

But Trebla's concept was just false; surviving equals living, there was no getting around that. Maybe this was one of those eccentricities that super villain's had.

I tabled my musings, and left my apartment to head to the base for breakfast. Until 6:00am I drank coffee and ate breakfast foods, using the time to chat with the minions coming off of night shifts. Once I was done, I went to the gym and met up with Adder for morning sparring. I took this opportunity to ask her about Wandergheist, and about how its fighting style matched hers. She explained that it was because both of their styles were based on 'hyper-efficiency'. Rather than focusing on a practiced selection of combat maneuvers, they focused on thinking multiple steps ahead, and applying minimum force to maximum effect. Easy to say, but not as easy to do, as Adder demonstrated by knocking me to the mat while I tried to practice the concept. Real combat was messy, so spending valuable processing cycles on prediction rather than reaction was dangerous. Still, as proven by Wandergheist and Adder, it was scarily effective once mastered.

After an hour of practice, I headed to the shooting range to experiment with and practice designs. The sling-shot tongue idea had worked rather well, all things considered. Just needed to make a few changes so I could talk while using it. Modifications to the vocal cords would solve that problem. As for ammo, I actually needed something slightly less lethal. If my goal was to leave the target alive, I didn't want to have to maim them before letting them live, as it

would cause them to prioritize targeting me in future encounters. I was glad now that Ifrit had warned me against it, I hadn't realized how adverse humans were to superficial damage like losing a hand. Tim had once mentioned there were medical supers who could regrow body parts, so I had thought it a non-factor.

I needed non-lethal ammo. To that end, I turned to the decoy design I had used on the stitched rats. While that design had been mostly to lure the rats with smell, I wanted to focus on the fact that it was a non-solid projectile that decayed. When I made something using micro machines, the resulting object is laced with micro units that are still connected to my core. The unfortunate result is that anything I make decays in seconds when separated from the signal my core produces. Up until now, I had thought of it as a design flaw, but I might actually be able to use it to my advantage. If I made the projectiles myself I could time them to decay before impact, and the result would not be as lethal as a solid metal slug or spike might be.

I tried a few different variations until I had a design I liked; a small pellet about the size and composition of an eyeball. When I tested it on the targets on the range, it had enough impact to push the lighter targets back, but not enough to put holes in anything. Hopefully this would be a good deterrent without having to maim.

...But it was sooo resource intensive, and I couldn't reuse them like metal slugs. Bleh. I'd save these for fragile targets like sidekicks and civilians.

At 8:00am I wrapped up my experimenting, and after picking up my paychit, headed to Maggie's Sunrise Diner for another breakfast to regain some of my expended mass. While there, I got into a conversation with the people sitting next to me at the counter seats about lockdowns. None of the eastern sectors had entered a lockdown

yet, which was apparently a rarity? Odd Summer has officially been declared in effect for two weeks now, and while bad things had happened, nothing bad enough to warrant quarantining a whole sector.

“Why is it odd to not have had a lockdown?” I asked one of the older males sitting at the counter.

“What, ye daft? The wall’s right over yonder,” he replied.

“Oh be nice Harold,” replied an older female, “Are you not from around here young man?” she asked me.

“No ma’am, I moved here a few weeks ago,” I replied. Both of them had accents that reminded me of the way Jasper sometimes talked.

“There Harold, you see? Young man just moved here. Why don’t you answer his questions proper?” she said.

“Yeah yeah, I’mma getting to it,” he turned to me, “Y’see lad, like I said the wall is only three sectors away. All it takes is fer one particularly nasty critter to get over, and then you gotta lock it down.”

“I thought the wall was impenetrable.”

“Ha, maybe once upon a time when Overlord was in charge, rest his soul, but them U.N.A gobsmackers can’t pull their heads out of their ars-”

“Harold!”

cough “-out of the ground without five commitees and a permit. Thank God fer New Dawn. Without them we’d be up to our eyeballs in vampires ‘n banshees ‘n other shi-”

“Harold!”

“-shtuff. Other stuff.”

“Still ain’t as good as when Overlord were around mind,” said another old timer, to unanimous nods among the ‘older’ humans.

I spent an hour talking and eating with the ‘old-timers’ before moving on. It was somewhat disheartening to learn that New Dawn Inc. was for the most part in charge of the wall’s security, along with ‘the army’. The installation I had escaped from had been near S5 or SE5 depending on how well I was judging the distances involved. But apparently there was a New Dawn installation in NE16 next to the wall, which was much closer to E13. The big question was: would New Dawn Inc. become an obstacle? They had spent the resources to create me, and as far as I have seen, I was somewhat unique as a weapon. Was I valuable enough for them to attempt recovery? How long had my ruse delayed their response? Would they even bother to track me down? *Could* they even track me down? With the right super, anything might be possible. Too many variables...

For now I tabled the thought. New Dawn Inc. was a large faction, but Hellion’s Henchmen had been operating out of E13 for quite a long time now, which made it an ideal place to solidify my position. A stable environment meant predictable factors. If New Dawn Inc. came after me I’d just have to be prepared.

To that end, I spent the next hour mapping parts of E13 I hadn’t been to yet. I wouldn’t get close to finishing even if I spent days doing it; even a single sector was absolutely massive (especially the outer sectors), but it made me feel better. I paid particular attention for possible tunnel access points (and food vendors) since knowing about possible escape routes was always a good thing. Especially since the architecture of E13 could vary greatly depending on where you were. It was easy to get caught in a dead end, or unsafe alleyway if you weren’t careful. One alley I cut through actually had some wires strung across it that I ran into. The annoying things were sharp

enough to cut, and tangled easily, so I was forced to destroy them with micro units to untangle myself. Annoying. It was probably a Tinker Tot trap since it was close to their territory.

At 10:00am I went back to my apartment building to knock on Cindy's door, and ask if she was still coming to the arcade. With the rats attacking the mall yesterday, we had all made plans to meet up at our usual hangout instead. Cindy answered the door, but seemed somewhat dazed; had she been sleeping?

"Tofu? Wha -**yawn**- 's up?"

"Are you still coming to the arcade?"

"Arcade?...Ack!" Her eyes lit up. "Sorry, sorry! Give me a moment, I'll be ready in a sec!"

Once she was ready, we headed off. I found it a bit odd that she had slept for so long, and on a hunch I called Mikey and Tim to make sure they would be there on time. Tim was on his way, but Mikey had been asleep.

And he skipped morning practice again. I'm going to have to drag him there aren't I.

Once at the arcade, Tim and I settled our plan to bet on the outcome of games. After trying a few different games, I realized that my reflexes were simply too good to play against him in two-player games like Alley Fighter 2, so I surreptitiously challenged him to beat the high score on some of the single player ones instead. Mikey and Cindy went to play the two-player games while I tried to give Tim a challenge, but after a while we wanted to do something we could all

participate in, and we gave up on power testing to try the four players games instead. We did that for two hours, and then at 12:30pm decided to get lunch at a nearby Mega Burger (I had the triple stack).

“What should we do next?” asked Tim, “I think I’m kinda burnt out on the arcade myself.”

“How about we go see a movie?” suggested Mikey.

The others agreed, and we left the arcade to go to a ‘movie theater’ at 1:00pm. It was a few blocks away; a large, stylized building meant to stand out from the blockier (efficient) buildings. In previous explorations of Ashwood St. I had avoided it due to the apparent security at the entrance. Guards constantly checked pieces of paper (tickets, I now knew) presented by entering humans. Mikey bought a ticket for a small group room, and after presenting it to the door guard, we entered the main chamber of the building.

Where I was immediately inundated by the smell of butter, salt, and something that was slightly burned.

“Wanna share one big popcorn since we just ate?” asked Tim.

“Um, better make that two,” answered Mikey. What was he looking at me for?

Tim and I got two large containers of ‘popcorn’, a strange snack that was apparently just for taste and texture, as it had almost no nutritional value. There was also a complimentary soda packet stand, and I stopped to make myself a drink.

“Ugh, dude. Did you really mix Nectar into there?” said Tim, “It’s so sweet, how can you stand it?”

“It’s my favorite.”

“Ugh, and you already mixed two other sodas in there. That stuff is meant for mutants in the first place. You’re gonna get kidney stones.”

“I’ve been fine so far,” I replied, brushing it off. I wasn't going to stop drinking Nectar if I didn't have to.

We went down a corridor that had lots of doors with red and green lights over them, and Mikey led us into the first room with a green light. Inside there were six plush seats in a row, all anchored to the floor, and facing a wall that was one large screen. Mikey went to a touchscreen that was mounted next to the door and asked, “Alright, what do you all feel like watching?”

Mikey, Tim, and Cindy all discussed options while I sipped on my soda concoction. I didn’t really have a preference beyond not comedy. Humor was still something I hadn’t gotten a firm grasp on, and the few times someone had told me a ‘joke’, or when something ‘funny’ had happened, I hadn’t reacted appropriately.

“Tofu, help us out here. What do we pick?” asked Mikey suddenly. I didn’t know enough about movies to answer such a complicated question, so I just blurted out the only movie I knew of.

“How about The Thing movie you were telling me about?”

Mikey paused, and then grinned, “Ha! Excellent choice. What do you two think?”

“Uh, that’s that one horror movie you keep telling me about right?"

said Tim, "Maybe we should watch something none of us have seen…"

“I think that’s a great choice,” said Cindy, also grinning.

“That’s three votes to one. Sorry Tim, seems you can’t avoid it any longer,” said Mikey, as he hurriedly punched it in.

We got ourselves seated, and the room automatically darkened before two ‘advertisements’ played. One for Puzzle’s Pretzels, and one for some type of home security system made by New Dawn Inc.

The movie itself was amazing. It depicted a “monster” with remarkably similar shapeshifting abilities as my own, slowly infiltrating and consuming the occupants of an isolated human outpost. According to Mikey, this movie was made over one-hundred years ago, before Odd Summer had ever started! Human imagination was truly incredible. As far as I knew, something like me had never been made before (the scientists had specifically called me a prototype after all) so to think they could have predicted a combat scenario involving an organism similar to myself was simply marvelous predictive thinking. There were differences true, like the creature’s ability to replicate, but our strengths and weaknesses were so similar that it was easy to create parallels and begin thinking up countermeasures.

I took a lot of notes.

“You were right Mikey, my shifting does look a lot like The Thing.”

“Heh, hope the movie wasn’t too on the nose,” Mikey replied.

“No, it seemed very evenly distributed.” There was a lot more than just the monster’s nose changing.

“Uh… sure.”

The movie was about two hours long, and Tim had to leave once it was done to attend a ‘family function’. Since it was just Mikey, Cindy, and I, we were using the opportunity to discuss topics more related to my abilities, and Hellion’s Henchmen. What Cindy called “business talk.”

“Anyways, I wanted to ask, did anyone from work mention the rats?” asked Mikey, “Whoever did it isn’t like, a client or something right?”

“Hell no!” said Cindy, “Hellion’s Henchmen wouldn’t work with some dick who attacks civilians indiscriminately. It’s probably just the Espada trying something assholish again.”

“Uh, right! That’s kinda what I figured,” said Mikey, apparently surprised at Cindy’s sudden vehemence. Cindy also seemed somewhat embarrassed by her response, although that was probably because her voice had started becoming raspy towards the end. She covered it up by coughing, and searched through her bag for her inhaler.

“I talked to Sandra about it yesterday,” I supplied. “She said that if the heroes didn’t take care of it she’d get some cowls to do it when they got back from their activities.”

“Ah, that’s a relief… wait, there are even more super villains in HH?” asked Mikey.

“Of course. You didn’t think it was just Hellion, Imp, and Socket

right?" said Cindy.

"Uh, kinda?"

"Nope. Most of them are off doing their own thing."

As we wandered down Ashwood St, Cindy gave us a more in-depth description of the cowl situation at HH. Most of the details I knew about, but learning about the other "real villains" that worked with Hellion was interesting. HH operated predominantly on several legal loopholes that labeled minions as accessories to a crime when a super villain was involved, and not truly criminals themselves. Using this quirk of the laws, HH rented out teams of minions to villains who needed a little extra muscle, or support. However, this didn't mean that HH didn't have its own cowls. Before Hellion had started Hellion's Henchmen, she had been part of a criminal organisation that had just begun setting up the Red Zone. That organization hadn't been as… neighbourly, as HH was, and once Hellion triggered, she and other like-minded cowls had ousted the old leadership, and set up the Red Zone and Hellion's Henchmen in the state they were in today. Many of those cowls, like Socket and Imp, stuck around permanently, while others went off to do their own thing, only coming back if they were needed. One ran several 'casinos' in the Red Zone and almost never left them. Another had been arrested and sent down to Panama, but when his sentence was up, had found he liked the constant warfare and had stayed. As Cindy described more absent cowls, I got the feeling that most of them were… eccentric.

"Wow, I didn't know HH had such a history," said Mikey, "How do you know all this stuff Cindy?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, my mom, um, works in the legal department with Sandra."

"Ah, that's cool."

"But Cindy- **cough cough**," Cindy stepped on my foot, signaling me

to stop talking. I covered it up nicely I think.

We wandered around a bit longer, just 'window shopping', eventually passing by a store with several mannequins in the display window. They were wearing white ‘dresses’, used for something called a ‘wedding’, and looked positively impractical. The entire store was apparently to sell just these? Bleh. Why would anyone want non-convenient clothing? Something like these dresses would rip and be destroyed in even the smallest scuffle.

“That reminds me; would either of you know a good place to buy clothes? I need something that won’t rip if I fight in it.” I kept meaning to acquire clothes, but somehow never got around to it. Plus, The Thing movie had me leary about not having real clothes. The monster in the movie had been revealed by taking small pieces off of its disguise, and that could easily happen with the fake coverings I had formed. Real clothes would make my disguise more realistic, and as a bonus I wouldn’t need to constantly waste resources shifting to change what I was “wearing”.

“Been having wardrobe malfunctions?” asked Mikey, grinning.

“No, I just don’t have any clothes I can use with my power.”

He frowned in confusion, “Oh. Well what about the ones you’re wearing now? They look like they’ve held up well, where’d you get them?”

“These aren’t clothes, they’re made with my power, see?” and I briefly shifted the color along one sleeve of my 'hoodie'.

“But if your power can make clothes, why buy them?” asked Cindy.

“It still costs calories every time I change them, and if it tears it bleeds. It’s still part of me.”

Mikey and Cindy were both silent for a moment. Then they looked at each other. Then they looked back at me.

"Hey Tofu," started Mikey, "Shot in the dark here. But if the clothes are part of your body… are you technically naked right now?"

I thought it over... "Technically yes."

Both of them took several moments to give me odd looks, then Mikey threw up his hands in a shrug, "Nope, not as surprised as I thought I'd be. C'mon emperor, let's find you some clothes."

"Follow me," said Cindy, "I know a good place."

By 3:45pm, we made it to an out of the way shop, a few blocks off of Ashwood St. Inside it were a few small stands with clothes, but mostly there were mannequins and posters, displaying all manner of mutants in different clothing designs. Seems this store specialized in mutant clothing.

"I come here all the time," said Cindy, "Babs is cool with HH, so you can tell her exactly what you need Tofu."

"Alright."

Babs turned out to be the owner of the store. She was a tall woman wearing a pinstripe dress, and her straight black hair hung down one side of her head, while the other half was shaved clean. To my distress she also had a 'nose ring', with a chain that connected it to an 'earring' on the shaved side of her head. Why didn't humans attach 'jewelry' to less strategically vital parts of their bodies? I'd rather lose an arm than my sensory organs in combat, but humans

put all that sharp metal hanging right next to their eyes. I kept all my sharp metal bits internally, where they couldn't be used against me, like any sane individual should.

"Cindy, what a pleasure," greeted Babs as she approached us. "And who is it you've brought with you?"

"This is Mikey and Tofu. We're here because Tofu needs clothes and he's picky."

I wasn't picky. Like I told them on the way here, I just hadn't found a store that sold what I was looking for. The clothes they sold were impractical, didn't fit my disguise, were too expensive, or wouldn't hold up under combat conditions. I still regretted that the jacket I took off Frankie hadn't been usable. I hadn't found one like it since.

"I see, I see," said Babs. She looked me up and down. Then frowned. Then did it again, moving closer, and staring intensely. It gave me that uncomfortable feeling like when a crowd of people were all looking at me at once. I didn't like having my disguise under scrutiny.

"I don't recognize any of these," she said, "Are they custom? It looks almost like generic brands, but there's too much effort put into the seam work. I don't know anyone with this style either. Curious."

"I made them using my power," I answered. Then I shifted the color of the sleeve like I had with Mikey.

Her eyes widened, and she grabbed my sleeve. "Your power can make… this isn't cloth."

"It's technically flesh. I'm a shapeshifter."

Her eyes grew even wider, if that was possible. Then she grinned. It reminded me exactly of Trebla's smile...

The next few hours were… interesting. Babs began with closing the store, before barraging me with questions about my power, and having me display some of what I could do. It was basically like working with Socket, except for the lack of dangerous machinery. She seemed especially excited when I told her I could grow extra limbs and mimic mutants, but I balked at doing so since I didn't want to waste the calories. Then she offered to give me several outfits for free if I 'modeled' for her. I did a quick food-to-money conversion calculation, and accepted since buying sugar was cheaper than clothes.

For the next three hours I shifted, and tested her outfits. She didn't ask me to do any of the more heavily modified combat models today, but there was enough variation even among only slightly altered humans to keep me busy. Besides an extra pair of arms, changing other things like skin color, ethnicity, and sex were all easily done by moving fat deposits and slightly readjusting bone alignments. I didn't keep my skull as one solid piece, which made changing my face easy.

"Thank you for modeling these pieces for me Tofu," said Babs, after I had peeled off the final outfit for the day. An odd piece, meant for someone with two right arms and a stronger left arm. "Sometimes I get ideas for these outfits and can't resist making them before I realize I have no one to try them."

"Tinker twitch?"

"Oh no, I'm no tinker," she laughed, "Just an enthusiast who gets over-enthusiastic. I moved here to have more customers for my designs, but even E13 can't keep up with my imagination it seems. I

don’t suppose I could interest you in a job?”

“Sorry, I already have one.”

“Drat. Well, if you ever have some time, feel free to drop by.”

I left Babs’s store wearing a brand new set of clothing. My T-shirt was made of a durable material that could stretch to multiple sizes. The ‘jeans’ I was wearing had built-in holes by the knees, which would allow me to shift parts through them, and were guaranteed to last even if more holes got poked through them. And finally my favorite item: a large and bulky pseudo-leather jacket, with lots of hidden pockets on both the outside and inside.

I headed back home, with two large bags of clothes in tow. Mikey and Cindy had been almost as interested as Babs in my shifting, but Babs had just kept going and going, so they had both left ahead of me. I would have left a lot earlier myself, but Babs kept promising me more outfits, and admittedly her knowledge of different styles, and clothing in general, was immensely useful in explaining why humans wore the things they did. I especially enjoyed what she had to say about how certain color combinations and patterns could be used to signify danger.

But, as interesting as it was, I had somewhere to be. I hurried home, and by 6:55pm I headed to the base. The Trebla job had been a big job, therefore tonight there should be a company dinner. Hopefully I wasn’t running late. I was looking forward to it.

7h17m34s24ns P.M.

I was distraught.

“I’m sorry Tofu,” explained Sandra, “But I’m afraid the dinner got canceled because of this rat debacle. A lot of people went missing, and we’re waiting to see what the heroes do before we decide how we’re going to handle it.”

“Ah. I see.”

“There’s still snacks in the cafeteria, why don’t-” her phone rang, “Oop, excuse me I need to take this,” and she began rapidly talking to whoever had called her.

Indeed, it didn’t seem like a very celebratory mood amongst the minions at the base. While I was grabbing a donut from the cafeteria I heard multiple mutters amongst the minions such as “Espada *again*? Shit, do you think they got new recruits?” and “My niece was at that mall. She almost got nabbed!” I hadn’t realized they’d be so concerned, but apparently the nature of a ‘mass kidnapping’ had many of the normal employees spooked.

I nibbled on my donut, but it only replenished a fraction of the resources I had used shifting all afternoon. I had been expecting a big dinner.

I left the base.

I needed to make a phone call. Then I was going to go wander down

some dark alleys.

I had an appetite for meat.

Ch33 Hangry

Human.exe emergency shut-down;

Human.exe displaying behavior harmful to core: analyzing...

Calculating…

Odds of triggering prospective prey: 0.002%

Odds of encountering non-hero super powered individual: 0.4342%

Odds of encountering combat design mutant: 67.897%

Odds of lethal encounter in combat scenario: 0.9276%

Odds of discovery: 23.354%

Kernel wipe possibly detrimental to formulating solution: resetting parameters...

Restarting Human.exe;

For two hours I had been hunting for rats or dark-shriekers (banshees as the old-timers called them) with no success. I didn't come across any organisms in the back alleys south of Ashwood St, not even any muggers. The irritating lack of prey had prompted me to start calculating the best possible method of targeting a civilian, and I needed to catch myself before I could do something wholly stupid.

Tim claimed the chance of triggering was one out of five thousand during Odd Summer, but I had already caused one inadvertent trigger with the acid woman. I wouldn't risk triggering a second, especially

since I suspected any trigger I caused would give the individual an ability to counter me. Powers were theoretically based on what the organism “wanted” during the trigger event, and I assumed anything I triggered would want to kill me; the acid woman might have been a nasty situation without the gun. Considering that ‘civilians’ were the human demographic most likely to trigger, active hunting of humans would definitely have to be reserved for after Odd Summer unless absolutely necessary.

So, the fact that I had even entertained the notion of hunting civilians was a problem. The thought shouldn’t have even been listed among possible solutions, let alone entered active calculation.

The problem stemmed from my human brain. Ever since I gained access to more resources, I had been able to run a more robust, and complete, version of a human’s thought processing organ. This was immensely beneficial, as the predictive abilities of a human’s brain was second to none. Comparing my thought processes now, to my thought processes before I received Human.exe, was laughable. Before, I could barely figure out the correct way to bludgeon a brown-fur to death, and it took me months to realize that passively reacting to the tests would eventually get me killed. If I had the processing power I had now back then, I would have figured out both in minutes, not months.

Unfortunately, this processing power came with a downside. Namely, all the little quirks that affected human thought processes now also had the potential to leak into mine. In this case I had been angry, which increased aggression, which caused the errant thought of hunting civilians to go into active calculation. Not something that would have happened without Human.exe simulating anger for me.

I sighed. I had multiple logs in memory of previous kernel wipes.

They had dropped in frequency as I got used to using Human.exe, but they weren't going away completely. The reduction had stalled. What I needed now was a way to improve, but I wasn't sure how to proceed. The problem was an accumulation of factors between my core, my human brain, and Human.exe, but mostly from Human.exe. It was what simulated the emotion 'anger' for me. Without it, the closest I could come to an emotion resembling anger was a mild irritation, if that. I didn't experience emotions in the way a human would, and I would be hard pressed to explain the difference if asked. Even turning off Human.exe and attempting to simulate anger on the brain organ didn't create the same sensations for me. It was hard to be influenced by organs when you had full manual control over all of them.

So. How to stop Human.exe from influencing my decisions with anger and other emotions?

Leaving Human.exe off was unacceptable. It handled a large portion of my combat calculations, and **all** of my social skills.

I could remove the sections of the brain that handle emotional processing, but that would affect my social reactions. Plus, when I tried it, several kernel wipes were immediately added to the log, and I didn't notice any reduction in anger from Human.exe. I *really* wish I could access the inner code.

I need more information. Humans dealt with emotions every day and didn't get themselves killed, and they couldn't even turn them off. How did they handle this? I pulled out my phone and did a search for anger. Maybe there was a medical manual I could use to better modify the brain, or maybe a…

First result: a definition of anger.

Second: Causes of anger.

Third: How to manage anger.

Anger management.

How to control anger.

Anger and Aggression: a Psychological Analysis.

Anger management group therapy.

And just about a couple thousand more links to related, or tangentially related topics. Well. I definitely knew what emotion I was feeling right now: embarrassment. *Of course* the humans would have researched this already, and in incredible depth. Their proactive problem solving was ever impressive.

I opened a few of the links in tabs, and set about reading the different guides on anger management and control. Some of it wasn't applicable to my unique situation, and some of it didn't quite make sense, but what I very quickly realized was that I needed more 'emotional awareness'. It seemed that even humans had trouble realizing when emotions were affecting their logical thinking, and step number one was to realize it was happening while it happened. To that end my course of action was clear. I'd leave Human.exe running, and my brain unmodified, and proactively identify and catalogue the effects of emotions on my thought processes as they occurred (and look up a list of emotions, apparently there were a lot more than just the base ones I was aware of). Once that was done I'd be able to adjust all my calculations accordingly going forward.

Let's see, figuring out a solution to the emotion problem was… pleasurable. A good start.

Having solved the most pressing problem, I started walking in the direction of Nicole's den. With my hunting plans a failure I would need to quickly find an alternate source of food I could share with her. I wanted to give Nicole something that would convince her to help with my request: having her escort me in the tunnel system while I investigated the stitch rats. Sandra didn't want me in the sewers without a more experienced person present, and Nicole was the most experienced person I could think of. She'd been living down there for years now after all. A shame I couldn't find a banshee, I'm sure she'd have appreciated fresh meat from an organism she didn't normally have access to. From what I knew about her, she seemed to favor fresh meat, but I think she liked cooked meat as well. At least, she had said the kobe beef was delicious in her texts.

I started parsing through the vendors in the area; Mega Burger, Puzzle's Pretzels, The Salad Bar-barian, Pizza Place. These were all decent 'fast food', but I needed something better, preferably something that actually had a meat option. I couldn't backtrack to Maggie's in time to meet Nicole, which meant finding another 'restaurant' nearby. But where to go?

I scrolled through an online listing of food dispensers for E13, rejecting one after the other. There was an 'Italian' restaurant nearby, but their online menu didn't have any meat. One restaurant served a soup with real chicken broth, but it was in the opposite direction. If I could just find…

Oh! Perfect.

The Darksider's Bar n' Grill was just as crowded as the last time I came. People eating, drinking, 'armwrestling', doing knife tricks, playing 'chess', etc. A unique atmosphere among human establishments, but very similar to large gatherings of Hellion's Henchmen. It made me wonder if all minion groups had this in common.

I approached the bar: a long counter stretching nearly from wall to wall. Unlike most furniture I encountered, the top of this counter was fitted with a polished substance called 'wood'. Supposedly it was the same material paper was made from, and came from an organism similar to my potted plant, but bigger. Paper wasn't too uncommon, but anything made from large quantities of organic material was rare in Fortress City. Presumably due to the dangers of collecting it from the 'wilderness' outside the city's walls.

"No kids at the bar. Come back when you're twenty-one," said the bald man behind the counter, the 'bartender'. I didn't recognize him from the last time I was here.

"Um, I wanted to order food?"

He frowned, but asked, "Watcha want?"

"Your online menu said you have 'Fish n' Chips,' could I get two of those to go?"

"Alright. Wait at a table, I'm serious about the bar."

I paid with a chit, then scanned the room for an empty seat. There were several options, but I recognized one of the chess players; a large 'hispanic' man with long, gray hair wrapped in a braid. He wore sunglasses even though the lighting wasn't very bright.

“Hello Teddy. Mind If I sit here?”

“Hm? Who... Oh! The little lost amigo! The heck are you doing in our neck of the woods again? Not lost again I hope!”

“Not this time. I’m actually headed over to my friend’s place again tonight and wanted to buy food. This was on the way.”

“So you did find your little friend. Well sit, sit and tell us your tale. Your friend must be quite something if you’re making another nighttime run.”

“She is.”

“AYYYYYYYYY!”

Both Teddy and several of the other nearby humans let out multiple raucous noises, as well as jabbing me in the ribs with their elbows. Luckily I had seen this behavior among humans often enough to know it wasn’t an attack, although I still didn’t know exactly what it meant. If my brief experience at school was anything to go by, I had either said something abnormally humorous, said something to embarrass myself, propositioned someone for reproduction, mentioned an accomplishment worth celebrating, or triggered an ‘inside joke’. Really, humans sometimes attached too many different meanings to a single action or phrase. It made parsing through the slang difficult at times.

It only took fifteen minutes for the fish n’ chips to be ready, but somehow that was enough time for the crowd around Teddy’s chessboard to become denser, rowdier, drunker, and for a small contest to form over who could jab a knife between the splayed fingers of their hand the fastest (Teddy broke this activity up because they were chipping the tables, but I think it was because I was winning). When the meals were ready, Teddy then offered to give me a ride to Nicole’s again.

“That’s alright Teddy, I know the way now.”

“And let the fries get cold while you waddle your way there? You won’t romance anyone that way cabrón. Come on, nice night for a ride.”

We headed out to the parking lot and made for his motorcycle; a large machine decked in ‘chrome’ that was almost twice as ornamented as any of the other bikes. A handful of others followed us out, but Teddy turned back the ones who were drunk. He handed me a spare helmet and I hopped onto the back seat as the Darksiders started their bikes. Each bike gave off a quiet hum as the engines started, and we were soon off down the nearly empty streets. With so little traffic we made great time, and it gave us enough visibility that we spotted a blazing truck well before it entered the approaching intersection, and didn’t collide with it as it ran the red light.

“Fuckin’ another one. Hey Dale, Carlos! Follow that puta and keep eyes on it would ya?” yelled Teddy.

The two bikers in question nodded and peeled off to pursue the pick-up truck.

“They are going to track it?” I asked.

“Somebody has to. Those flaming heaps are a menace.”

“I thought the police or heroes deal with them.”

“**Tch**, I wish. Those cars haven’t hit anyone *yet* so the C’s have started ignoring them. Only a matter of time before someone gets creamed, so we’ve been keeping an eye on them.”

“...are the Darksiders a vigilante group?”

“Haha, nah, we’re nothing that serious. We just keep an eye out for things, like a neighborhood watch. Anything we find we just try to

inform the C's so they deal with it, or sometimes we pass it on to Hellion's crew…"**cough**"…. Only cause they tend to do something if it's important, mind you. We wouldn't normally turn to them, but they tend to solve problems faster than the C's, and people need that during Odd Summer. You know how it is."

"I do."

Teddy dropped me off at Manchineel St. before going on a 'neighborhood patrol'. Apparently a neighborhood watch was a type of communication network, with the goal of identifying threats and passing the information along to someone else who could better handle it. Much more sensible than direct vigilante action in my opinion, although Teddy did claim that some situations needed to be solved with a 'knuckle sandwich'. It sounded tasty.

I lifted the manhole cover that led down to Nicole's den, and climbed down into the dark tunnel. There were some nessies swimming in the canal next to the ladder, and I had to bop one that tried to see if I was edible. It was the biggest of the small group, and I recognized it as the one Nicole called Mr. Chonkers; a frequent visitor of the canals around Nicole's den. A shame I couldn't just kill one of the nessies to eat, but Nicole was adamant that they not be harmed. The nessies' ability to both scour the tunnels and filter the water made them invaluable to her, and she tried to encourage them to inhabit her area. Her efforts were working; there were definitely more nessies then normal around right now.

I made my way around the corner, and spotted Nicole sticking out of her den. She was concentrating on fiddling with a long length of metal pipe, about six inches in diameter and over ten feet long.

“Hello Nicole.”

“Hey Tofu, one sec. Just need to get this cut… just… right.”

She was holding the center of the pipe with her mandible claws, and after lining up one of the larger combat claws, sheared a two-foot portion off the end of the pipe. It fell into the ‘palm’ of her other large claw, ringing dully against her chitin armor. She raised the piece up to her eyes and examined it critically.

“Hmmm… yup, looks good.”

“What are you working on Nicole?”

“Just cutting up some pipes. I need to divert some waterflow for the nessies. They like a flowing current, and they’re kinda jamming it up right now.”

“Yes, there do seem to be a lot of them.”

“Right? I’m not sure what’s up. At first I thought they were attracted by that rat swarm I killed, but the leftovers are long gone and they’re still coming.”

“So this isn’t normal behavior?” I looked at the nessies. Several were poking their heads out of the water in curiosity of Nicole’s work with the pipes. Far more than I had seen gathered before were occupying the lighted T-intersection where Nicole made her home. “Isn’t that dangerous? It could be Odd Summer related.”

“Maybe? I’ve never seen a nessie trigger though. I’m not sure they have it in them. Either way, they’re keeping the place clean enough to run a restaurant out of, so I’m not gonna complain.”

“Speaking of restaurants. Here, I brought food.”

I pulled out the containers of food (still hot inside) that contained the fish n' chips, and we had ourselves dinner, Nicole taking a few token bites before making the usual excuse to withdraw into her den to store the rest "for later." I was positive that she must have a second mouth somewhere, likely attached closer to whatever core she was keeping hidden. Normally I wholly approved of such defensive measures, but in this case I was worried it would hinder my plans. If I couldn't convince her to accompany me, I couldn't search the sewers. I finished up my fish (a breaded, rectangular chunk of oily meat; very tasty), and cleaned up the wrappings while listening to Nicole detail her construction plans for the sewer.

"I can't tap the water main in just one place you see. The amount of water I need to increase the flow in this area would immediately alert the city to a leak, and it might cause problems besides, so I plan to make a bunch of small taps in adjacent areas and let the small leaks accumulate into a stronger current here."

"It sounds like a solid plan."

"I hope so. The only thing is, I didn't realize how hard it would be to cut the pipes haha. My rotosaw crapped out on me, and my claws aren't exactly made for precise cuts; I keep crushing the pipe half the time."

"I can help with that. How long do you need the section to be?"

"Really? Um, about two feet long if you can."

I grabbed the length of pipe from the floor and measured a two foot section. Then I placed my hands around it and set my micro-units to work. A brief initial test of the material (mostly bronze, with slight oxidation wherever the protective coating had been damaged), and a few seconds later I had a nice even cut. I handed the piece to Nicole to see the result.

“Wow! That’s even better than a rotosaw. That’s so cool! You did this with your power? How does that even work, I thought you were a shapeshifter. OH! It’s molecular right? You’re shifting the atoms around. It’s like you’re dismantling it instead of cutting.”

Ack. She had gotten a lot out of such a small display. It was one thing for people to know my abilities, but quite another for them to know how they worked. Best to feign ignorance.

“I guess so? I just sort of ‘do it’.”

“I see. But still, that’s so versatile. I can think of a dozen uses off the top of my head. I wonder if it would work on reinforced steel, or *tinker composites*! That would make accessing the water line so easy…”

Nicole’s eyes drifted as she presumably imagined the different uses of my power. An interesting effect considering she had eight of them, and most of them went off in different directions. Humans had such interesting mannerisms while thinking intensely.

“If you want,” I began, “I could help you install those water flows you were talking about.”

“…Eh? Oh, um, I can do that myself. I wouldn’t want to be a bother…”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble Nicole. I have plenty of time right now. In fact I need help investigating the tunnels, so you would actually be helping me out.”

“R-right now!? No, I-I don’t have what I need ready yet anyways.

Why would you need to go into the tunnels?”

“Whoever made those bodies you found seems to have gotten them to work, and has been upping production. A bunch of modified rats trashed a mall last Saturday, and several people went missing.”

“Oh my god! That’s horrible!” she exclaimed, one pincer clacking in what looked like a nervous tick. She eyed the claw strangely, and mumbled the next part. “Jeez, why wouldn’t you mention something like that first…Wouldn’t the heroes be investigating this though? Why are you doing it?”

“I’m sure they are, but they’re stretched thin at the moment. I’ve already confirmed that they’ve needed to let lower priority emergencies go, so the quicker this is dealt with the better.”

“I see… you know, I can just go myself. I’ll look for them down here and you can look for them topside. Cover more ground and stuff..."

“It would be best if we both go. I’m expecting a fight once the culprit is found. I would have gone myself, but I was told I’m not allowed to go alone, and I believe that is for good reason.”

Nicole fell silent, except for the occasional clack of one of her large claws. Her eyes looked anywhere but at me as she presumably calculated the risk of accompanying me into the tunnels. I found it a bit worrying (confirmation: detected emotion = nervous), if she didn’t go with me I didn't know what my next course of action would be. A few casual mentions of the subject back at the base had shown me that most of the minions had absolutely no interest whatsoever in going down into the tunnel system, and I wasn’t confident that the lieutenants would be any more eager, if they even had the time. I really needed her help with this.

“I’ll buy you a cinnabon.”

Her eyes blinked as she focused back on me. “What?”

“A cinnabon. They sell them at the mall and they’re tasty.”

Nicole stared at me as a very awkward silence descended. I was worried that I said something rude, when she broke the silence with a half-hearted chuckle.

“It's fine Tofu. I wouldn't ignore a problem like this. I'll go with you. It’ll have to wait until tomorrow though, I really do need to get some stuff together… Make sure you bring anything you might need, you’ll be slogging through a sewer after all. And the cinnabons! Two of them for me! If you’re gonna bribe me it won’t be cheap y'know.”

“You got it.”

We made plans to meet the next day around noon, and I left Nicole so she could make her arrangements undistracted. I myself planned to visit the grocery store to top off my reserves, and then let Human.exe ‘sleep’ for the night. Whatever we encountered in the tunnels tomorrow, I would be ready for it.

The emotion I was feeling this time was quite familiar to me: satisfaction.

The next morning, I made sure all my knives and ammunition were in order, then attended practice as usual with Adder. Afterwards, I sat in the cafeteria eating breakfast (toast with jelly) while calculating possible combat scenarios for the day. I had familiarized myself with the tunnels underneath Maggie’s diner when I first started living in

E13, but admittedly I couldn't make an accurate risk assessment from just that. Everyone I met seemed to be wary of the tunnels under Fortress City, so there must be some threat that I didn't know about. Maybe some large predator I had yet to encounter? Other bio-weapons, like Jasper had mentioned? Some kind of… big… metal... trap device? Like a puzzle test?... Huh. Proactive risk prediction was harder than it seemed. Humans made it look easy. Maybe I'd just do some target practice instead.

"Hey Tofu! Just the guy we were looking for."

I turned to see two familiar faces. "Hello Brilla, hello Fred. You were looking for me?"

"Wellll, not so much you, and more so anyone we can drag along as muscle," replied Brilla.

"Ah. Sorry, but I actually had plans for today."

"Uh-huh. And do those plans include eating on the company dime?"

"Um..."

"While poor Fred and I need to work without protection? All alone in a cruel, cruel world?"

"Er, I didn't-"

"All because Pebbles and Buzzer, who were *supposed* to be helping us, are in the slammer because *someone* forgot to drag them along?"

"...Will it take long?"

"Just an hour or two, meet ya in the garage. Toodles."

Brilla headed off in the direction of the garage, Fred giving me an apologetic smile as he followed her.

Hmph. Another emotion I was familiar with: frustration.

“So what are we doing anyway?” asked Gregor. He had also gotten pulled into helping Fred and Brilla, and the four of us had headed out in a van.

“We’re headed to the Pit,” replied Fred. “Illegal fight arena in the Red Zone. Run by a guy named Ivan Belltoni. Seems some trouble went down at his place, and he wants us to look into it. He’s a sleazy crook, but he pays good money to Hellion, so try not to piss him off.”

When we reached the Red Zone, Fred and Brilla led us to a building that looked far more subdued than the Red Zone’s normally brightly lit entertainment establishments. It almost looked like a warehouse, and would have stuck out if it wasn’t hidden off the main thoroughfare of the Red Zone, surrounded by other shadowed structures that likely contained all the resources it took to keep the entertainment district running. All of the food and illegal products had to be stored somewhere after all.

Fred rapped his fist against a solid iron door set into the wall of the building. A small opening at eye level slid open, and the door quickly slid to the side to let us in. The door watcher was a skinny man, with dark blotches under his eyes. He gestured with a hand to follow, “Boss is this way.”

He led us down a dim hallway, but we emerged into a large, brightly

lit rectangular room. Along the walls were benches arranged on a slope to give maximum visibility, and at the center of the room was a raised stage encased in a chain link cage. Two mutants were currently in the cage, one with four arms and chitinous growths along his shoulders and the other with a bone exoskeleton than encased his head, neck, and most of his upper torso. The two of them were fighting, but it appeared to be a training exercise, as they were only throwing punches, and neither of them was actually trying to kill their opponent.

I recognized this place. It was a test chamber. True, it wasn't as sophisticated as the one I was made in, but it had the bare minimum of a combat area, and a place for the scientists to sit and observe.

...I did have to wonder about the safety precautions though. That cage wouldn't hold if a brown-fur went berserk, let alone if a yellow-fur triggered.

There were a few other people around the large room, most of them cleaning detritus and other things off the floor (one of which looked like a bloodstain). We approached a rather overweight man in a wrinkled suit who sat next to the cage. Occasionally he would pull a stubby, smoking 'stick' out of his mouth to yell advice at the two fighters, although I wasn't sure how useful "Just fuckin' hit him!" was as advice.

"So, the boneheads finally decide to show. Take a break you two," he directed at the fighters, "Try not to suck so much next time."

The two mutants left through a gate set into the side of the cage, one of them nursing a bloody nose. From the suited man's demeanor, I assumed this was Belltoni.

“Heard you had some trouble last night Mr. Belltoni?” said Fred.

“You could say that. Seth, go haul out the leftovers,” he said to the skinny door guard, who left to carry out the order. “Last night a bunch of fuckin’ pack rats broke in. Strangest thing I’ve ever seen. They weren’t after any food. No, instead they went after my fighters like they was made of cheese, right in the middle of a match.”

“They hurt your fighters?”

“Fuck no, what kinda place you think I’m running? Rats got their asses beat. The crowd loved it. Thing is, these weren’t no normal rats.”

Seth was returning from a side room, wheeling a pallet whose contents were covered by a tarp. He lifted the tarp to the side to show us the corpse of a dead stitched rat. One of the big gray ones like I had seen in the mall. The stitches and scars that marked the surgery were clearly visible.

“Ugly thing ain’t it?” said Belltoni, “Saved the best one for you. Someone’s playing Frankenstein, never seen them this big before.”

“They can get even bigger, but this is definitely one of the stitched rats from the mall,” I said.

“Don’t care,” growled Belltoni, “All’s I know is some asshole made this fuckin’ thing, and then sent it into my place of business. I pay my dues just like everyone else, so I’d *appreciate* if this gets taken care of.”

“No worries Mr. Belltoni, we’ll be looking into this for sure. Gregor, Tofu, take this thing down to the van. I think we’ll take it to Stitcher’s, see what we’re dealing with,” said Fred.

Gregor wrapped the tarp back over the corpse and grabbed the front half, while I grabbed the back half. Together we easily lifted it, and set about taking it to the van.

"Shit, Hellion always snaps up the good muties," said Belltoni, "Either of you interested in making some side money?"

"No," said Gregor.

"I'm not a mutant," I replied.

"Bah, useless. What about you good lookin'?" he directed at Brilla, "Wanna make some dough? Easier than for them. More fun too."

Brilla responded with a rude gesture and started walking away. I thought we weren't supposed to try and anger him?

"Heh. That's how they all are… at first," finished Belltoni.

Fred and Brilla led us on an alternate (and less frequented) path to the van, citing that seeing two minions hauling a dead body might be a bit too 'spooky' for the tourists. It seemed a bit weird that they would like seeing Belltoni's fighters kill the rats, but not like seeing the body afterwards. Speaking of fights…

"Do you think Belltoni would let me fight if I promised not to shapeshift?" I asked. It would be a great way to practice and earn money at the same time.

"Er, I think you should probably avoid that place Tofu," said Fred.

“Why?”

“Because a place like that turns men into animals,” replied Gregor.

“And animals into Belltoni,” added Brilla, “You can practically feel the desperation in that place.”

I considered their advice; I hadn't expected such negative responses. I also hadn’t picked up on the negative connotations of Belltoni’s establishment, nor had I felt ‘desperate’ there.

A caged fighting stage. Physical harm. An audience that wanted to see violence. The owner of the place caring nothing for the safety of the fighters. Blood.

Hmm, it was much harder to identify what emotion the Pit made me feel, but if I had to identify it…

Nostalgic?

Ch34 Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts

Mutavus mutations can be broadly categorized into four general categories, the first being minor internal mutations. These are alterations such as a modified heart, or liver, or lungs, things that can't be seen by casual observation. This type of mutation is often caused by some type of ongoing medical problem, such as cystic fibrosis in the case of lungs, or alcoholism in the case of liver. At some point the condition becomes immediately life-threatening, mutavus activates and somehow senses that the problem is a simple malfunction of normal bodily functions, and then solves the problem in the most efficient way possible: by permanently fixing the afflicted organs. Of note is how little extra modification takes place; when these minor modifications were first starting to be discovered across hospitals the world over, it was thought that they might not even be due to mutavus. The near-zero instance rate of trigger events in this population later proved that mutavus was indeed the cause.

The next two categories, selective external mutation and full-body mutation, are really the same thing, it's merely a sliding scale of severity. These are caused by external events such as a stab wound, a fall from a great height, a violent rape, et cetera, et cetera. Basically anything that puts the host's life at risk while not actually killing them. These, I believe, are a result of mutavus trying to 'solve' a situation that has no clear-cut answer. Sure you can patch a knife wound, but how do you stop the possibility of a knife wound from ever happening again? By covering the body in armor? With superior reflexes and your own

bladed weapon? With the ability to spit acid onto potential attackers? How do you choose? A virus has no brain, no thought process, it can barely even be called alive by our standards, so how does a *virus* choose? For some insight into this we turn to the fourth category: catastrophic mutations.

You've all heard the horror stories no doubt. An unfortunate injury resulting in a monstrous, cannibalistic horror-creature out of a crazy man's worst nightmares. These are what truly makes mutavus such a feared and reviled affliction, but why do they happen to begin with when most mutations seem largely beneficial? Some research of the injuries involved in these cases shows that most were a result of massive physical trauma, *often involving the head*. Now, we all know that bad triggers can be the result of a drug-induced, altered mental state. The fact that a traumatic head wound would also obviously hinder mental state suggests a linked cause. It is my belief that mutavus "piggybacks" on whatever phenomena causes trigger events, and therefore, is affected by the host's conscious mind in a similar manner.

Now. A lot of this is merely conjecture on my part. It can be difficult to separate cases of catastrophic mutation from other oddities of summer, or even just from regular cases of mutant animals, so keep in mind the data I've managed to collect is not the result of a scientific survey, but merely my own investigations of singular cases. Mutavus also tends to handle hallucinogenic or similar recreational drugs quite easily, whereas these drugs are terrible to combine with triggers, but that's a matter for a different day.

> Today, I wish only to test if massive brain damage truly increases the odds of a catastrophic mutation. To that end, I've assembled a variety of implements with which to do so, most notably this common N17 Lobbe handgun. I've been told its low-caliber ammo will indeed pierce a skull, but will not do so much damage as to kill a person before mutavus can begin its work… Hmm, note to self: do areas of higher gun use or ownership have more frequent occurrences of catastrophic mutation? I'll check into that after we finish up here.
>
> -Monologue given by Dr. Kevin "Killaman" Jaro to a class of college students before his death at the hands of one of his victims.

Apparently we were heading to a 'hospital'. A quick internet search on my phone revealed that it was where humans took their sick and injured for medical care. It wasn't something I had ever really questioned before, but in hindsight it made sense to centralize long-term medical care and vital medical resources. I had sort of assumed the 'ambulances' I saw from time to time were the de facto method of assisting civilians in need of medical help, seeing as they appeared whenever there was a car crash, or street brawl, or sometimes when a human just collapsed. The first time I had seen a human collapse for no reason had scared me, as I thought there was another super picking targets out of the crowd, but I overheard that the man had suffered a 'heart attack'. Research told me that it was a strange condition where the human heart just stops beating, primarily affecting older males? I suppose this was a condition similar to choking from clogged airways, an unfortunate product of the human design (a heart just...stopping. *So* strange). Either way, it's apparently not too big a problem, because the human in question got back up well before the ambulance arrived.

I scrolled through the website for E13 General Hospital, a large building just a few blocks north of the Red Zone. They had several different areas of medicine listed as departments: primary care, rehabilitation, neurology, maternity, emergency (which had a lot more doctors listed than the others), and more. Quite a long list… Oh! There was a mutavus emergency response and care ward.

I was starting to feel... excitement! This trip had the potential to be a lot more beneficial than I thought. Maybe I could slip into the mutavus ward for a bit and have a look around, or one of the surgery wards; I'd love to see how humans fixed internal damage without the aid of mutavus.

The van rounded a corner, and the front of the hospital came into view. The building itself was a gigantic rectangular structure, about three blocks long by two blocks wide, but only two stories tall, much shorter than the surrounding structures. The longest side of the building was also the front entrance, and from the design I could tell the place was built for large influxes of patients. Multiple entrances marked as "Emergency" were spaced out along the front side of the building, and a wide approach lane allowed a small army of ambulances to easily enter and disgorge passengers without getting in each other's way. As I watched, three ambulances were doing just that, the multiple humans of the medical caste carrying the injured civilians into the building. Let's see, if I was reading the website correctly, then the humans driving the ambulances were emergency response technicians or EMTs, the ones who did surgeries were surgeons... optometrists, neurologists, nutritionists, *so many!* There were dozens of specialized personnel for every facet of human biology! ***Fascinating***. Not all of them were located in the hospital itself; the sheer number of specialists and their required resources probably just didn't fit. Were there really that many different facets to a human body? I had dismantled a decent number of them now, and hadn't noticed anything that would require that many areas of study. Skeleton, musculature, brain and signal transfer system, skin

and internal pressure maintenance could be counted as two systems I guess, appendix, the heart, and of course the multiple filter organs like lungs, liver, kidneys…oh! There would be two different reproductive systems; one for male, one for female. That increased the count, though not by much… had I missed something? It all seemed rather simple besides the brain; why would they need so many specialists? Admittedly I hadn't managed to figure out why they had so many separate and redundant filter organs, but only the single appendix, so there might be subtleties I wasn't seeing. So strange… it had to be because of mutavus. It changed their biology on an individual basis, so maybe they were trying to cover all possible permutations? It seemed like a fruitless endeavor considering the near infinite variations mutavus might choose, but then again, humans did seem very stubborn when it came to the pursuit of knowledge...

A mystery for later. Right now I was more concerned with all the police I was seeing around the hospital premises. Especially since they all appeared to be armored and armed.

"That's a lot of police…"

"Hm? Oh don't worry about that," said Fred, "Just don't cause any trouble and they'll ignore you; the Red Zone basically funds this whole hospital, they know where their salaries come from. Not like anyone wants trouble happening at a hospital anyways. Actually that reminds me, if either of you are ever in-mask and need medical help, get your ass to a hospital. Don't try to tough it out or some stupid shit. Doctor's can't reveal anything they find out while treating you."

"Sandra told me during my interview," I replied. Gregor nodded his confirmation.

That whole part of the interview made a lot more sense now. I had figured if worse came to worst I could just kill whoever was trying to unnecessarily treat me. Much harder to do if it was a bunch of doctors in the middle of a hospital, and not just some EMTs down an

empty side street. Honestly, I probably should have found out about hospitals a lot sooner, but I had been avoiding flashing lights and sirens whenever possible, and hadn't come near this area while exploring.

...Exactly how many areas of interest was I missing by being ignorant? Worrisome. I needed to practice proactive scenario envisionment like humans did using movies.

While I pondered the best person to surreptitiously ask about 'interesting places', Brilla drove the car into the rear parking lot. There was a lot less activity on this side of the building, and we eventually parked near what seemed to be some kind of loading dock. Fred went to get a gurney to wheel the body in, since having two helmeted minions carrying a body around in a hospital was 'too conspicuous'. I didn't see why putting it on a gurney was any better. It wasn't a human body anyway, why would anyone care?

"Me and Brilla can do this part if you guys would rather wait here," offered Fred.

"I'll come. I'm interested in meeting this Stitcher you mentioned." As if I was going to miss out on a look inside, pfft.

"I think maybe I'll watch the van," said Gregor, "Don't much care for hospitals."

I found that strange. Hospitals seemed so exciting.

Fred led the way while I pushed the gurney. We used the loading dock entrance to enter; inside were a few workers moving boxes of what I assumed to be medical equipment. Fred walked up to a wide-

eyed worker and asked him to go get Stitcher, and he practically ran to do so. The other dock workers quickly made themselves scarce.

After a few minutes, a man entered the dock area. He had thin hair despite his young age, and a crooked nose that supported a pair of spectacles. While his eyes were red from lack of rest they were nonetheless sharp, and he zeroed in on us immediately. Most telling was that he wore a white coat. A scientist.

“Whoever you’ve brought me better be at death’s door. Do you have any idea how busy I am?” he asked.

“No worries Stitcher, should be quick. No medical care today, just need you to see if you can I.D. a super for us,” said Fred.

“I’m not Hellion’s personal mortician,” he sneered, “I’ve got better things to do than digging through the aftermath of your mistakes.”

“Easy doc. I think this one might interest you,” said Brilla, and she lifted a corner of the tarp to reveal the stitched-rat’s head. The stitches and surgical modifications were on full display.

“...You brought a dead rat into my hospital,” said Stitcher. He scowled at the body, but after his gaze swept over the extent of the surgical modifications he sighed. “This would be one of the rats from the mall incident yesterday?”

“This one attacked an establishment in the Red Zone last night, but we think it’s the same guy.”

“Ah yes, that would explain the suddenly expedited interest. Fine. Follow me, and make sure that thing doesn’t drip on the floor!”

We followed Stitcher a bit deeper into the hospital while he

continuously grumbled about patients he had to get back to. Several times he pulled aside members of staff to have them go check on active situations. I surmised that his apparent hectic state was an ongoing affair. We arrived at a room labeled “Morgue”, and he had me wheel the rat body in after him...

Bodies. Lots and lots of bodies! The room was full of them, and an extended shelf that poked from a small square aperture hinted at more stored away. They were in all shapes and sizes, with a few mutants in the mix as well. I started calculating my odds of being able to eat a few. It was unlikely I’d get a chance, but still! The things I could learn!

Stitcher pointed at two people working in the room and ordered them out, then directed me to move the rat to a large steel table welded to the floor.

“I hope none of you are squeamish. I can’t have my usual assistants help with cowl business,” Stitcher announced.

“I’ll be fine” I replied. Fred and Brilla looked a bit more reluctant.

Stitcher pulled the tarp off the body and began looking it over.

“Hmm. No lacerations, no real blood loss. Cause of death appears to be blunt force trauma. Rigor mortis hasn’t set in yet, are we certain it’s actually dead and not just unconscious? I’d rather not have it jump at me half-way through.”

“Uh. I mean it didn’t move on the way here,” replied Fred.

“Tch. Which could mean absolutely nothing. One of you stab it in the neck, over the drain please.”

I grabbed the corpse by the head and moved its neck over the drain before doing as asked. The blood didn't so much leak out as ooze out. Definitely not fresh. Fred wasn't looking too good, and Brilla was refusing to look directly at the operating table. I guess they were 'squeamish'. Stitcher finished putting on a different coat, along with a cloth mask to cover his mouth and nose, and approached the rat body.

"Not the best conditions, but I'm in a hurry. One of you take notes, or just pay attention, I'm only going over this once. Now then..."

Stitcher held out his hands, and a strange shimmer effect emerged from under his sleeves and encompassed them. It looked like they had been covered in crystal clear water. He had a power! As I watched, the substance around one of his fingers lengthened to create an edge, and he used it to start dissecting the rat. His power reminded me of Magenta's, but on a smaller, more precise scale. He talked while he worked, and I found it interesting to see how a human analyzed the corpse.

"The skeletal system is reinforced with metal in several sections. Care was *no*t taken in preserving a normal range of motion. The digestive and muscular systems are mostly untouched, but there is no mismatched scaling with the rat's other organs, so whatever method they used to grow the rat to such a massive size was done properly at least."

"That's a normal rat size. I think it was modified after it grew that big," I supplied. His eyebrows rose at the information.

"...What metric are you using?"

"Tiny fits in my hand, small can jump at your face from the floor, medium is this dead one, and large hits its head on the sewer ceiling."

"...I see. I believe I'll be putting in a request for an extermination crew later."

Stitcher kept opening up the corpse, paying special attention to the individual organs to check them for modification. He was starting to grumble about wasting his time, when he got to a section at the base of the rat's skull.

"Ah-ha. Here we finally have something interesting."

He was pointing at a lump of flesh that looked like brain matter wrapped in bone. It almost looked like my core (but with more fleshy bits).

"This tumor here is artificial. See the melding of different tissue types, but the design is too structurally demarcated to be a normal cancerous tumor. If my guess is right, there should be… yes, right here. See this?"

"...I don't see anything?"

"Precisely! There is no connection between the tumor and the brain. There is no connection with this tumor and *anything else* in the body. The stitchwork on the epidermis is superficial, the metal reinforcing the bones should hinder the creature more than help, and the only piece of functional design isn't connected to anything! This super playing at being a Victor Frankenstein is just that: playing. My hypothesis is that their power does all the heavy lifting in order for this rat to actually function. Any actual surgical work is simply an activation requirement, or maybe it isn't even necessary at all and they're just a wackjob."

He started to clean up after the messy dissection. The mask and overcoat went in a bin with other dirty articles of clothing, but his power had kept his hands immaculately clean.

"So, any idea who might be doing this doc?" asked Fred. He should probably sit down for a bit and rest; he wasn't looking so good.

“Well, the good news is that it's definitely not an established super,” said Stitcher, “A power that makes remote drones from corpses to do the user’s bidding? Far too rare to not have been noticed before, even if its user is a complete hack. The bad news is that it’s probably a new trigger, so it could be almost anyone. Have they announced any demands?”

“Nothing so far.”

“Well in that case they are probably just a fresh trigger flexing their power. Do try to get rid of this one in a timely manner please. This type of power tends to cut out if the user is *removed*, but I’d rather not wait until they have a small army before finding out. Either way, I’ve wasted enough time on this as it is. Please clean the mess up on your way out would you?”

With those words Stitcher walked out of the morgue, and Fred, Brilla, and myself were left alone. Fred and Brilla took one look at the remains of the corpse, looked at each other, and yelled, “**Not it!**” They both ran out of the morgue, claiming that they “Need to make sure Gregor is fine,” and to “Take all the time you need!”

I looked at the large rat corpse, and the bodies throughout the morgue, and the lack of any cameras or humans.

It seems that biding my time on reporting the bio-weapons had finally paid off.

Elation.

It was a shame I had filled up the night previous and couldn't actually 'eat' most of the bodies, but I refused to miss out on this opportunity and deconstructed **all** of them with micro units, even the normal human males that weren't mutated (and dumping the dust down the drains to keep the room clean). The final count was twenty-five bodies, with 15 of them being mutants and nine of them being female. The mutants were of course the most valuable (one had a chitin composite that was 5.67% more durable, and 2.5% more resistant to stress!), but finally having multiple examples of female and male anatomy was useful. So much of a human's appearance was based on their skeletal/muscular structure, and there was only so much you could glean from the surface.

The most interesting thing I noticed was that, of the fifteen mutants, only six of them had outer mutations, and the rest all had internal mutations. Modified hearts/lungs/sensory organs, I recorded all of these especially carefully. Hearts were needed to properly distribute micro-units, and the improved lung design gave insight on how I could absorb mass from the air much more efficiently. These two organ designs I incorporated right away.

After I was done making sure the morgue was clean, I decided to have a look around the hospital. Fred and Brilla said I could take as long as I needed, and I still had enough time to meet up with Nicole later as long as I didn't dawdle. I'd just need to take a taxi to get to the mall and buy cinnabons.

I decided to disguise myself to not draw attention, and stored my mask before covering my suit in fake clothes (my real ones were in a locker back at the base). The extra bodies meant I could discard the layer of fake clothes later and still be topped off on resources.

The hospital was laid out in a logical fashion, with very clear

demarcations between civilian and staff areas (I considered a doctor disguise to check these, but discarded it as unwise before I knew more about what a doctor did). Whoever had designed the hospital had a clear goal in mind, which was to expedite treatment and quickly clear the space for fresh patients. Patients would enter from any of the several emergency entrances that serviced the ambulances, and would be shunted into one of the nearby operating rooms, whichever was appropriate to service their specific injury. Once stable, they were then moved to a series of rooms where the doctors decided if they could be released, or if they needed to be moved to more permanent care. This 'middle' part of the hospital also seemed to service the less immediate medical concerns of civilians who filtered in from non-emergency entrances on the short sides of the rectangular hospital. The back half of the hospital was the area they released patients, and it had both waiting areas, and peripheral features of medical care like the 'pharmacy'. As far as I could tell, all ongoing medical care was moved to the top floor.

It made sense now why this building was wider than it was tall; it was designed to be abandoned at a moments notice. A tall building would be harder to evacuate, and the fact that the hospital was spread over a wide area meant they could build hallways and entrances/exits to be wide and accommodating for fast-moving heavy traffic. Other design features included reinforced alcoves and doors, redundant structural reinforcement in case parts of the building collapsed, sloped ramps next to every staircase to wheel patients down, and 'unnecessary' waist-high walls in the parking lot that would nevertheless be perfect for civilians or guards to duck behind. Whoever designed this building had been fully aware that a place full of injured and scared humans would be a statistically likely location for problematic trigger events. That, or they had been expecting an invading army.

I decided to keep my exploration brief.

The top floor was a lot quieter than the bottom floor. Carpeted surfaces and decorated walls meant that sound didn't echo, obviously a feature to help patients rest. There were still a lot of doctors wandering around, but I noticed more non-injured civilians as well. I wasn't sure why they were here until I saw one carrying a 'balloon' with "Get well soon!" printed on it. I suppose humans visit patients they know in the hospital?

I explored a bit more, but this part of the hospital wasn't as interesting as I thought it would be. Mainly it was just a bunch of humans resting in beds. The mutavus treatment ward was also blocked off by armed guards, so I couldn't go exploring there. But, as I was about to call an end to my exploration, I found something in a small alcove near the elevators: a vending machine! I had seen and used similar machines at the mall, and I found they were always worth looking into. They often had completely different selections of candy. I scanned the options and located a candy brand I hadn't sampled before; Sour Bombs, witch-apple surprise flavor. I slotted a few coins and made my selection, the curled metal hook slooooowly turning to drop my prize into the dispenser area.

And then stopping before it dropped.

I pressed the 'dispense item' button a few more times, but the electronic label just displayed the price to buy another one. Clicking the return coin button also failed to give my money back. The machine stole my coins!

I looked around, hoping to spot a staff member or guard I could ask for help, but of course I just so happened to be alone (never around when you needed them to be). Well… the candy wasn't really blocked off entirely, and I *was* alone. Maybe I could just fix this situation myself. If I was quick, I could have it out of there before

anyone saw me. Even if they did it wasn't like I was doing anything wrong anyways, I had already paid!

I reached my arm into the dispenser area, and bent my elbow out of its socket to get it around the hand guard. Then I used the extendable bone structures I implemented in my forearms to get as close to the candy as possible. I was only two feet away, so it wouldn't be too hard to stick a tendril to the candy. Hmm, and maybe I could take one or two more. After all, it was the machine's fault I was having to expend valuable calories to get the candy…

Footsteps!

I quickly hooked the pieces of candy I intended to take and pulled, but in my hurry to withdraw my hand I must have touched some kind of sensor inside the machine. The dispenser area suddenly clamped shut on my arm! Trying to wrench it free didn't work, I'd have to shift it free, or break the machine, or abandon the arm to get loose.

The human I heard approaching rounded the corner, a dollar bill in hand. He had obviously been planning to use the vending machine, but stopped and stared when he realized it was 'occupied'. Then a small beeping alarm started coming from the machine, because *of course* it did. The only good thing about all this was that I recognized the man.

"Hey Olson, the machine ate my money, can you help me out?" I recognized him from the brief glimpse back on the training day. Short blonde hair, medium height, in shape but not really muscular, the only feature that really stood out about him were his vivid blue eyes.

Said eyes widened in surprise, and then narrowed in suspicion. Oops, I guess Olson uses a different name out of costume? “It’s me, Tofu.”

Even then he seemed suspicious, checking around to see if people were in earshot before saying, “Prove it.”

I pulled out my mask, and when even then he seemed suspicious, shifted the colors along my fake coverings while shifting the joints in my free hand in ways no normal human could possibly imitate.

“Ack, alright alright. I believe you, just stop that hand thing. How the hell did you recognize me?”

“I was in the fake jacket store when you went through on the training day.”

“...I didn’t notice you.”

“I like standing in places that are out of the way,” and out of line of sight of windows, and near solid cover, and where I can duck out of sight at a moment’s notice. It was simply prudent. He sighed and gave me a look that I couldn’t quite figure out.

“Um, could you help me out now?” I asked. I could hear the stomping of boots coming down the hall, and it worried me.

He rolled his eyes and appeared to make up his mind, “Yeah, yeah. Call me Bryson, and if anyone asks, you’re Cale. *Try* to act natural.”

The stomping boots were of course a pair of guards who had showed up to see what set off the alarm. They came around the corner with grim faces, and hands on their hip holsters, but soon started laughing when they saw my predicament and realized it was a false alarm. One called it in while the other shut off the alarm and tried to figure out how to unwedge me from the machine. The dispenser wasn’t clamped anymore, but my arm was still stuck inside from the angle.

“How the hell did you bend your arm in there in the first place?” asked the guard.

“He’s just that special kind of idiot,” answered Bryson, before I could attempt to explain.

Bryson kept the guards distracted with ‘small-talk’ to keep their minds off the fact that it should have been impossible to get my arm into the machine, and instead kept their minds focused on how to get me out of it. I took notes on how he led the conversation with anecdotes or small innocuous questions, punctuated with a joke or two to keep the mood friendly (especially the jokes, I *still* hadn’t figured those out). The conversation had turned towards maybe getting a rotosaw to get me out, when another alarm went off. This one was really loud, and there wasn’t any way to confuse it with something like a broken vending machine. It rang three times before stopping, and both of the guards immediately went for communication devices hanging from their shoulders. While getting the report, they glanced worriedly at me and then towards a direction deeper into the hospital, where I assumed the disturbance happened.

“Go, go!” said Bryson, waving them away. “He got it in somehow, I’ll get him out with some vaseline or something. There’s gotta be some lying around somewhere.”

They nodded and took off, more concerned with whatever had set off the alarm than one person with a stuck hand. Bryson checked to make sure they were really gone before giving me the all-clear. I quickly shifted a bit to withdraw my arm (with the candy).

“So. What exactly are you doing here?” asked Bryson.

“I’m on a job. We were taking one of the stitched rat corpses that

attacked the Red Zone to be analyzed by Stitcher."

"Heh, I bet he didn't much appreciate the irony. So... if you're on a job, why the hell are you stealing candy from a vending machine?"

"I paid for it!"

He rolled his eyes, "Look, just get back to the job, and try not to get into any more trouble will ya? This was a one time thing, next time this happens when I'm off the clock you're on your own. Got it?"

"Yes Bryson." That meant I owed him lunch.

"Good. Now I gotta get back to what I was doing, I'll catch ya later."

"What about the alarm? Shouldn't we evacuate?"

"That wasn't an evacuation alarm. That was just to call some guards for *aggressive* medical care. Goes off like twice a day. It's only a real problem if-"

***BRINNNNGGG* "ALL STAFF. PLEASE BEGIN EVACUATION PROCEDURES STAGE ONE. ALL CIVILIANS PLEASE CALMLY EXIT THE BUILDING. DO NOT CROWD STAFF."**

"...that happens," finished Bryson.

"Now do we evacuate?"

"Yeah. Get back to your team, I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?"

"None of your business kid. Remember, you didn't see me here!" and with that he jogged back the way he came.

I headed back to where the van was parked, using the route I took from the morgue since it was the opposite direction of where the guards went. Hospital staff streamed down the halls to get to patients on the top floor. From their hurried but unpanicked demeanor, I

gathered they were all quite practiced at this routine. One nurse finally took notice of me, thinking that I was a lost civilian, and tried to direct me towards the normal civilian route. My mask started beeping in my pocket while she talked, so I decided to just head in the direction she was pointing so I could check it.

WHAT DID YOU DO? -Fred, was the message displayed. I messaged back that I had nothing to do with it.

GET BACK HERE PRONTO! -Fred

Yes yes, I was on my way. Annoying, this whole thing was going to make me late to meet up with Nicole. I'd need to call her and let her know.

I dialed her.

"Hello?"

"Hey Nicole, it's Tofu."

"I kinda figured haha. What's up?"

"Just wanted to let you know I'm probably going to be running a little late. I got called into work for a short job this morning, but it's running a bit longer than expected."

And it might run even longer from the looks of it. I had finally caught up with the flow of civilian traffic coming from upstairs. Apparently someone up ahead was pushing, because the crowd was stalled at a T-Intersection, and a few people were starting to panic.

"Oh. Well we could put it off for today…"

"No no! I'll be there. Just got caught up in an evacuation at the hospital."

"WHAT!? Why are you at the hospital?!"

"It's fine Nicole. I was just making a delivery. Remember I work at a

warehouse?"

"Well, jeez, be careful okay? Why are they evacuating?"

The crowd down the hall finally started moving again, but the flow of traffic was reversing instead of continuing to the exits. Humans were running away from the left corridor, and were picking any direction to run in. A final ripple of the crowd pushed the last of the humans into view, some of them were actually tossed through the air. What followed them was a rat.

At least, I think it was a rat.

It had a body like that of the medium sized rat we brought Stitcher, but where its head should have been was a… human torso? What looked like eight arms (all from different mutants) had been stitched to the torso's sides, and a rat's head was sewn on to where the human head would normally be. It tried to hiss at the crowd in front of it, but what came out was a weird gurgling bellow.

"Tofu? What the hell was that? What's going on over there?"

"...I think the hospital has a rat problem."

A note from Gogglesbear

Cale, as in kale the icky bitter vegetable. No one would ever suspect someone with that name to have anything to do with our delicious Tofu. It's the perfect disguise!

Ch35 Picnic

“No worries,” ***BAM*** “It doesn’t seem too dangerous,” ***BANG*** “It’s only the one after all.” ***CRASH***

“It sounds like an elephant in a china shop! And it’s doing the macarena!”

Elephant? Macarena?

“Nicole, believe me, its fine. I know how to deal with rats if I have to.” ***WHAM***

“Says the guy who had to be saved from them.”

“There was over forty of them!” ***THUD***

The weird multi-armed torso-rat definitely wasn’t the most agile thing around, but it was plenty strong. It must have smelled something it wanted further down the hall, because now it was chasing the entire crowd of civilians in front of it to try and get past them. Whenever it caught up to a person it would grab them with it’s eight arms, sniff them while they screamed, and then throw them angrily to the side. Definitely still hunting mutants.

I was blending in with the panicked crowd, waiting for a good moment to slip away. I had absolutely no interest in getting pulled into a fight right now, not in such a public setting. There would be guards coming to deal with this soon, and even I could predict that the heroes might show for an emergency at the hospital. Being arrested right now was not appealing in the slightest.

The rat grabbed a woman, sniffed her (she screamed), and threw her to the side. The crowd of people was starting to thin a bit as people ran down side corridors or were knocked to the floor, but then a dull

roar down one of the intersecting hallways had some of the humans running back into the main crowd. That was bad.

A second stitched-creature appeared from the intersecting corridor, this one with an intact mutant man's body that had a chitinous carapace, but with a nessie's neck and a rat's head. The two joined up and continued chasing the crowd.

Hmm, if I was gauging their behavior correctly…

__SKREEEEKKKiiikkiikikik__

Yup. A third stitch-creature was flanking the crowd from the next intersection. They might be heavily modified, but the stitch-creatures were still using rat hunting tactics. Both myself and the crowd were being herded.

Idiotic. They were going to herd a bunch of panicked civilians into a constricted space! During Odd Summer! There was well over five thousand people at this hospital, easily enough for at least one to trigger. Some more level-headed people in the crowd were trying to keep things under control, keeping others from being trampled and so forth, but it was only a matter of time before someone got truly hurt, and then the real panic would set in. Considering the circumstances, there was a good chance any resulting trigger would be a violent one. I didn't want to be around for that.

"Hey Nicole? I'm gonna have to call you back."

"What!? A-alright, but call me back when you're safe!"

"I will."

I hung up the phone, resolving to alter my version of events a bit when I retold them to her later. There was absolutely no way I was letting Nicole know I got herded by rats a second time.

Let's see, I had to make this look as normal as possible and get it done quick. The best thing would be to get something large and heavy to bludgeon the rats with. Avoid making them bleed, humans panic at the sight of blood.

I spotted a fire suppression canister in a case embedded into the wall. Shoving my way past a few running people, I grabbed the tab on the case that said "**LIFT HERE**" and wrenched the lid off. Then I grabbed the canister. It wasn't as heavy as I would have liked, but it was solid, and if Mikey's horror movies were any indication, bashing something's brains in with a fire suppression canister was common enough to not panic the crowd.

I slowed down and let people run past me. The two stitched-creatures approached, and I angled for the one with the long neck. Just a bit further…

The stitched-creature came in range and I swung the canister at its head. The metal canister slammed into the underside of the long-necked creature's chin, throwing its head up in a wide arch and breaking its jaw. The head flopped backwards over its own shoulder, and a moment later the rest of the creature followed, toppling onto the floor. It didn't try to get up.

Huh. That was easier than expected.

The eight-armed creature blinked in confusion at the sudden absence of its partner, before attempting another hiss-bellow and swinging its arms at me. I ducked underneath the first swing, but with eight arms it was able to land hits through sheer numbers. I couldn't dodge all of them while appearing human, and eventually three of its arms grabbed my sides. It attempted to lift me up and throw me…

…and failed. I was simply too heavy for it, and with an entire eight-armed torso crudely grafted to the front of a rat body, its center of balance was terribly placed for heavy lifting. Its hindquarters lifted off the ground before I did, and I used its resulting moment of confusion to slam it in the face with the canister. Once, twice, and then it roughly shoved me away to spare itself more head trauma.

The rat thing covered its head with its arms, trying to get its bearings, before suddenly flailing and roaring. I was about to step in for another attempt when a shoe flew over my shoulder and bounced off the rat-creature's torso. It didn't do any damage, but the rat paused to watch the boot hit the floor.

I turned to find that several humans had started to grab anything they could to arm themselves. Boxes, medical equipment, the one human who took off her boots and had already thrown the first. One especially large man had dumped the medicine off a metal trolley, and was lifting the whole thing over his head to brace it for use as a bludgeoning object. This human ran forward and *slammed* the trolley onto the rat, unbalancing both of them. While he recovered, other humans began throwing their objects, or directly hit the rat with their makeshift weapons if they were feeling brave.

The third rat-creature that had tried to flank the crowd wasn't doing

any better. The humans near it had also gathered weapons (one had somehow found a metal baseball bat), and proceeded to beat it to death in short order. That one hadn't had any real protective enhancements, and didn't last nearly as long as the eight-armed rat.

Very interesting behavior from the humans. I did not expect them to turn on the rat-creatures in such a manner. Most civilians I encountered always ran, and I had assumed it their default behavior in dangerous situations. My successful attack on the rat-creatures must have galvanized the crowd into going on the offensive. Indeed, the rat-creatures didn't really have any weapons beyond physical strength, and it wasn't like three rat-creatures outnumbered such a large crowd. It had only taken a visual example of seeing one human prevail to make the group realize an alternate (and better) method of survival existed. I'd definitely have to remember this tactic for next time.

The crowd slowly started to filter back towards the exits, some of them clutching their weapons while checking around corners, others helping those who had trouble walking due to injury or just frayed nerves. A few of the more proactive humans did that weird ritual where they hit my shoulder, and congratulated me on my martial prowess, or on the size of my 'testicles' (I'd never even bothered forming them, a waste of resources). Confusing.

As the crowd walked out I passed by the corpse of the third rat-creature. It had been more or less pulped, nothing more than a red pile of meat with no real features. Technically the rat-creatures were much stronger than any one human, even most mutants, but the combined might of the human crowd hadn't been a force the rat-creature could overcome. A good reminder of the lesson I learned with the yellow-fur. There was a reason 'weak' humans were at the apex of this world.

Yes, I'd definitely have to remember this tactic. How brutally effective it was, and how quickly they turned on a monster.

Escaping the hospital hadn't been difficult after the crowd killed the rat-creature. The guards had managed to subdue a decent number of the ones they came across, and when Turbo arrived at the scene he searched the hospital and ended the last few pockets of fighting in short order. Brilla was forced to move the van long before he came, due to some of the rat-creatures trying to get at Gregor, so at the very least they weren't at the scene when the hero arrived. I on the other hand, got stuck in the police debriefing afterwards.

I answered some innocuous questions about events inside, and assured a harried EMT that I was fine before they left me alone. In the crowd of civilians and police, I gleaned whatever information I could from the questions police and medical personnel asked, as well as the 'chatter' over their radios.

Twenty-five people missing, two critically injured and mutating, and one man dead after he tried to protect his young mutant daughter from a rat-creature. The rat-creatures had arrived using sewer tunnels around the hospital, and had broken a hole in the floor of the morgue to facilitate their escape with their 'cargo' (a shame I couldn't follow, but Nicole would never have been able to reach the tunnels under the hospital in time to escort me).

All things considered, it wasn't the worst outcome. No triggers had occurred, and the rat-creatures hadn't been able to break into the

mutavus treatment ward because of the already higher than normal security. My biggest problem was that I needed to call a taxi in order to get to the mall and buy cinnabons. The other minions couldn't risk staying with the hero around, so they had left after confirming I was fine.

After a brief stop at the mall, I arrived at Manchineel St. and paid the taxi driver. Then I climbed down the sewer entrance with my bag of cinnabons, making sure to dodge Mr. Chonker's half-hearted lunge and bonk him once. Eventually he'd learn to stop. Then I was almost running around the bend to get to Nicole's. I was terribly late for our established meeting time, by a whole hour and thirteen minutes.

Up ahead I spotted Nicole. I had called her after I left the hospital and let her know that I was safe. She had been worried about still going on our outing after what had just happened, but I assured her that I wasn't at all tired from the ordeal, and, in fact, was more eager than ever to begin exploring the tunnels.

"Hey Nicole, sorry I'm late, but I brought the cinnabons. I made sure to get more than one like you asked," I handed the bag of cinnabons to one of her smaller mandible claws.

Several of her eyes blinked, "You just got attacked by Frankenstein rat monsters and you're worried about cinnabons? Are you sure you didn't get hit on the head?"

"It was only a glancing blow. I'm fine I assure you."

"A-are you joking?"

"...Yes?"

I heard mumbling coming from Nicole's den. It sounded like she was talking to herself. Human's did that sometimes, although I hadn't quite figured out why.

"So are you ready to go Nicole?"

One of her claws **clacked**, and she fell into silence. She was avoiding looking at me again. The silence stretched onwards.

"Is something wrong Nicole?"

"...um. It's just… well…"

"I'm sorry the cinnabons aren't warm, but they didn't have a container to keep the heat in."

"It's not the cinnabons!" she said. Then she let out a big sigh, "It's just that… I don't like people looking at me..."

Confusion. She hadn't seemed bothered by it up until now.

"Oh. Then have I offended you?"

"What? No!"

"Cause I've been looking at you when we talk."

"That's not what I meant!" she yelled. I waited while she gathered her thoughts.

"Tofu, you're the only person I've met in years that doesn't look at me in terror."

Well, that wasn't *quite* true (I was rather terrified when I first met her) but I decided to remain silent about that.

"I don't want that to change…" she trailed off.

Well, that wouldn't be a problem. While I didn't have complete

control of my emotions, I did have complete and utter control of my facial expressions. If she needed for that to not happen, then I could do that.

“I promise that will never happen Nicole.”

Her eyes finally focused back on me, but she didn’t say anything.

“...Do you want to call it off?” I asked. I really hoped she didn’t decide to call it off.

And then she began to exit her den.

The first ‘segment’ of Nicole’s body was her head. It was reminiscent of a scorpion’s head, but heavily armored, and her eight eyes were placed in a semicircle along the top half of her skull. The first two eyes faced forward, and were the most like a human’s eyes; they had pupils, but the coloration was still uniformly dull gray to match her carapace, no visible iris. From there, a second pair was placed to either side of the first, this pair with no visible pupils. Next was a third pair that had strange pupils with an almost crosshair-like structure, and finally on either side of her head were the biggest pair, which were fully compound eyes. I recognized the compund structure from my research into insects and scorpions. All the eyes besides the large compound ones could blink, and rotate independently in their sockets.

I would have loved to know how her brain coordinated all the different visual inputs. I still had trouble with more than four eyes, let alone using differing designs. Mutavus had created a truly elegant design here.

The bottom half of her face was taken up by her mouth. The top half

was part of her skull like with a human's, but the lower 'mandible' could split in two, and was formed by a modified set of pedipalps. Both pedipalps were tipped by small, claw-like 'hands', composed of three 'fingers'. Although stubby, I had seen her deftly manipulate a smartphone screen with those fingers, as well as rip a rat's head off with them when it came too close to her face.

Oh, and her mouth could spit acid. An important detail.

The second segment of her body was where her main claws were attached. Both claws were large and armored, and while not truly sharp, were easily strong enough to shear a medium sized rat's body in half without effort. Together, the two claws were large enough to block half a sewer tunnel by themselves. It was almost like she was wielding two vault doors instead of claws. Impressive considering the rather thin 'arms' they were attached to.

Past her claws the segments became rather uniform. Each sported a pair of multi-jointed legs that stuck out from the sides, and ended in a two-clawed 'foot'. The joints themselves were odd, being a mishmash of human bone and arachnid exoskeleton, which resulted in a combination of ball-socket joints, and reversible joints that could easily change direction. The resulting legs looked almost too thin to support her weight, but mutavus had obviously found a way, as she practically glided out of her den, completely silent. Likely she'd be comfortable walking or crawling through a tunnel even if she had to do it upside-down or backwards.

All counted, there were twelve leg segments, which gave her twenty-four legs, and plenty of weight, and muscle, and leverage to easily handle her claw-heavy front end. I estimated that her total weight was actually around twenty-five tons, a bit higher than my previous estimate (although I would never tell her that, humans apparently

found it rude).

And then came the tail. Here, mutavus had outdone itself. I could *see* the perfection in its design. For about twenty feet past the last segment, extended a tail made from (if I was interpreting this right) braided cables of muscle. The outermost layer of muscles were like overlapping ribbons, and seemed to be made out of a *flexible* carapace composite (**how**?!), but when the tail flexed and coiled, I could see hints of the stronger cable muscles beneath. They likely extended all the way through her body, acting as an anchor for her muscular system in place of a spine. If I was right, this was how Nicole was strong enough to wield two giant claws like knives, and how such thin legs could support her weight. Mutavus had created some kind of hyper-strong, flexible muscle tissue! Envy!

Compared to all that, Nicole's core unit was somewhat… disappointing.

It was attached to the end of her tail, and looked entirely like the upper half of a normal human. One head with the normal accompaniment of sensory organs (straight hair tied back in a ponytail), and two arms with one hand each (five fingers). I assumed the rest of her torso was also in order, but I couldn't see it since she was wearing a black t-shirt, as well as well-used, heavy-duty overalls that ended in a many-pocketed 'skirt' around her waist (filled with tools I noted). The only abnormalities were her tail that connected to her lower body somewhere under her skirt, and the fact that her pigmentation was uniformly dark gray to match the rest of her carapace, even her eyes, nails, and hair. If it weren't for that she might have been any other young human woman. Her human torso didn't have any extra carapace, or scales, or claws, or spines, or anything else I could see. Too bad, but the parts that had mutated more than made up for that weakness. At least now I knew for certain why she always saved food "for later." Her acid-spitting mouth probably didn't have taste buds, and that was one of the best parts

about eating.

Nicole had a duffel bag hanging over one shoulder, and she nervously fiddled with the tools in her skirt pockets despite the fact I could see they were all arranged neatly. She kept glancing at me and then back at her tools, before finally saying, “Well?”

Confusion.

“Well what?”

The tension drained out of her posture (if having her core unit exposed made her *that* nervous I’d need to get her some armor. I knew *I* always felt better when my core was in my helmet).

She made a nervous chuckle, and then smiled.

“Let’s get going.”

“I dunno Abe. This looks sketchy as fuck,” said Blake. He stared down into the lightless hole in the floor and spat.

“It is. But we’ve got a detailed description of what we’re hunting, and over two dozen son’s of bitches who need help and fast. Clock’s ticking.”

“So why don’t they get a fucking cape in here. We’re pest control, not caped crusaders.”

“The only guy who could’ve had to leave. Some situation up north.”

“Pah, bullshit. Just doesn’t want to risk his own hide.”

“Maybe, or maybe there really was another emergency. Whole sector’s only got three capes, they’re stretched thin.”

“Three? Fuck. I hate working east sectors.”

“Everyone does, but look on the bright side, we’re getting paid double *plus* a bounty on each civi we rescue and rat we bag.”

“Can’t spend money if we’re dead,” said Blake. He spat another loogie down the hole and frowned when he couldn’t hear a splat.

“We’re also authorized to use the big guns.”

Blake turned away from his staring contest with the abyss and raised a questioning brow at Abe.

“For real?”

“Yup. Guess the sector mayor or some other big-wig wants this shit dealt with. They even offered to restock all the ammo we use.”

“Well **shit** Abe. Why didn’t you just say so? Let’s bag us some rats!”

The two men turned away from the hole in the floor of the morgue, and headed for one of the loading docks where the hospital received deliveries. Two vans and a large semi-truck were rolling in, all of them with the company's logo emblazoned across their side; the silhouette of a vampire, with a red circle and slash “No” symbol covering it.

The vans unloaded six people each, and including the drivers and support crew, that brought the group assembled here to twenty people. Abe and Blake had started as a small, two-man squad after leaving the service, and they had slowly grown their company into one of the better respected (read: expensive) extermination crews in the city, despite their small size. Vampires, banshees, illegal pets that had triggered and grown to monstrous size, you name it they had hunted it. Frankenstein rats was a new one for them though, so they

had called everyone in.

“Yo boss, what’s the big hullabaloo? I thought we were hunting vampires?” said one of the new arrivals.

“New plan,” said Abe, “Some asshole has been making Frankenstein monsters out of rats, kidnapped a bunch of people and then fled into the sewer. We’re being paid for each civi we get back and each monster we put down.”

There were surprised stares and worried murmurs at that. Rescuing kidnap victims? From a villain? That was a job for heroes, or maybe the police.

“Calm your tits,” growled Blake, with a sly grin on his face, “we get to break out the bolters.”

“For real?”

“And the client’s picking up the ammo tab.”

At that proclamation there were some cheers. They got to use the bolters? Then the job was as good as done, they just needed to save a few civi’s from overgrown rat monsters and collect their check at the end. Probably get a damn medal for it too, please and thank you.

The back of the semi-truck was opened up, and reinforced cases full of equipment were pulled out, including the two large crates with the warning labels (not because of the contents, but because if you touched them without permission Blake would rip you a new one). The hunters that opened them did so almost reverently, revealing the contents that were sacred to anyone who had ever been on the wrong end of too many claws and fangs.

“Kruger370 automatic, smooth-lock, portable hand-held heavy-bolters. Delivered straight to our unworthy hands from heaven’s very own gun assembly line, also known as New Dawn Inc’s factory number seven.”

There were four bolters total. Not enough for everyone who’d be going down into the tunnels, but enough to ventilate anything that challenged the group four times over. The portable version of heavy bolters could only use lightning rounds, but that was all you really needed. Designed to penetrate armor and lodge in flesh, the rounds were charged by the gun, and would discharge their payload to burn deep, a necessity when the vast majority of triggered animals wound up with regeneration as a power (the guns also had a stun setting, but who the hell ever used that). The only problem with them was the possibility of stray rounds, which put bolters under even heavier restrictions than normal weaponry. A single round wouldn’t always kill unless it hit the right spot (but it would put them down, New Dawn Inc. guarantee*), and the mutations that occured due to a lightning round wound… well, they tended to be nasty.

“Alright gather round you punks,” yelled Blake, as people finished gearing up, “Time to see what you’re working with.”

Abe waited for the group to assemble, and then pulled the tarp off a pile in the dock to reveal the body of one of the stitch-creatures that had assaulted the hospital. Several people recoiled at the sight of it, and expletives were used liberally.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s big and ugly, but that’s about it. No special abilities or powers to worry about, and they’re none too bright either. Most of the ones they put down were beaten to death by hospital guards, so a few bullets or a bolt will put them down right quick. One of the head doctors did a look-over, and it’s likely that the super responsible is a

puppeteer, not a tinker, so all we gotta do is pop them and the whole circus goes with them. Oh, and remember to check your lines of fire, all the kidnap victims were mutants. Even if they don't have armbands: check first! I don't need to lose a several thousand dollar bonus because ya'll were trigger happy."

The group set about making final preparations for the rescue mission. There were communications to set up, and they needed to make sure the hole was a viable access point. Some of the hunters were already done gearing up, and were gathered around the corpse. Partly to discuss tactics to use against other stitch-creatures, but mostly just to prod at it and talk shit.

"So the poor blokes got stapled to a rat. Ain't that the shit."

"Man, have some respect."

"How many of em do you think there are?"

"Don't really matter. Tight corridors, four bolters? There could be a hundred and we'd be fine."

One of the newer hunters, a guy named Tidus, nervously toed the corpse with his boot, "Are all of these parts mutant? Some of it looks off, besides the rat I mean."

"Might be some alligator mixed in, it is a sewer after all," said an older member of the group. Some of the group members chuckled. "Hey, I'm not kidding. There was that one guy with the green ooze downtown. They caught him dumping gator babies and turtles n' shit into a sewer with the stuff. Took a week to hunt it all down."

"So you've been in the tunnels before?" asked Tidus.

"I have indeed," said the veteran hunter, "Once back in S3 with the aforementioned gator babies, another time in N6 with a rogue

vampire."

"What are the tunnels like? I've heard stories."

"Bah. Course you have, I just told you 'bout the gator babies. Mostly they're just smelly. Trust me kid, we might run into some vampires or a gator or whatever, but that's what we got the bolters for. Besides these ugly beasties," he kicked the corpse, "the worst we'll see is some big rats."

Nicole

"Stay close, the rats are the least of our worries down here… not that close!"

She shoved Tofu to the side, and then immediately remembered that wasn't exactly socially appropriate. He hadn't actually been too close, but her personal bubble had grown over the last three years since she mutated, and her social skills were pretty rusty. Luckily, Tofu remained unfazed as ever, and ignored her social faux pas.

"I've been meaning to ask about that," said Tofu, "Everyone keeps telling me that the tunnels are dangerous, but the only dangerous thing I've encountered are rats."

"That's because you've spent most of your time in the sewers, they're the safest part. The section between us and the surface is dangerous because that's where all the understructure for the city is, and below us is dangerous because that's where all the organic life hides."

"That's where the rats come from?"

“No, they’re scavengers. They nest near the surface so they can raid it for garbage. They’re basically the bottom of the food chain down here, the only thing lower is the nessies.”

“Ah. Can you tell me more about some of the animals we could encounter?”

“Oh sure. Let’s see… there’s crickets, spiders, cheepers, sligs, crocs, one time I actually found an octopus, um, will-o-wisps, those you really need to be careful for, as well as vampires, grue, click-slithers….”

Hunters

“Ho~ly shit that is a big rat.”

“Understatement of the goddamn year. Thank god for bolters.”

The hunters were gathered around the corpse of an absolutely massive rat they had just downed. It was large and white and just about the size of a tank, with incisors like swords. It had damn near cracked the ceiling with its head when they loaded it with lightning rounds.

“I don’t see any stitch marks,” said one of the hunters, “think this is a Frankenstein special?”

“Gotta be. I’ve seen bigass packrats before, but that’s just ridiculo-**look out!**”

The hunter who cried the warning suddenly pulled the man next to him aside. Sticking out of the water where the man had been

standing was the head of a snake that could have given Chthulu a run for its money, tentacles lining a razormaw of teeth. The hunter's gun came up, and he fired a burst into the thing's face.

The thing *squealed* and started thrashing, and suddenly it became apparent that the 'snake' was attached to a larger body in the water. Blake came forward with one of the bolters, and sank some lightning rounds into the thing to finish it off. Only when it finally died did they dare to drag it out of the water.

"Fuck, it's like someone stapled a snake to a croc and then put my ex's head on it."

"You let *that* suck your-"

"Hey fuck you."

"Shut it. Both of you," said Blake, "We've wasted enough time as it is. Let's get moving."

They formed up and continued on, with Blake taking point and keeping a watchful eye on the pace. The dark and the risk of ambush was getting to some of the hunters, mostly the newbies, but Abe didn't like it either. Admittedly he had expected an easier trail to follow, but apparently the super responsible for the monsters saw fit to let them operate autonomously. There weren't any lights or equipment that might have indicated the attack on the hospital was planned from close by. The monsters were just dragging their victims through the sewer however far it took to get to their destination.

He gave one last look at the weird snake/croc monster that had tried to ambush them.

At least they were going in the right direction.

Tofu

“One sec, just need to wrench this lever and stop the flow for a bit,” said Nicole.

The lever in question was attached to the water main that serviced Manchineel St. and the surrounding blocks. Technically it was an emergency shut-off valve, but Nicole had jury rigged it to be an on/off switch. With the water stopped she could make small improvements to the pipes before turning it on again. We were trying to add a small spout to the pipe that would shoot water down a side tunnel, and make a current for the nessies.

Nicole grabbed the lever with her (human) hands and pulled. The lever must have been stuck, because she had to strain to get it to move, which caused the muscles in her forearms to stand out. That was when I saw another little mutavus improvement; when the muscles in her arms strained, they bunched up, coiling around themselves and creating squiggly patterns under her skin. Seems her human half was not as unmodified as I thought. Mutavus had changed the muscles internally to provide strength while leaving her appearance of a younger woman unchanged. A clever deception, I wondered how many enemies had targeted her core only to find it was not as vulnerable as it seemed.

Unfortunately, she noticed I was watching and her hands slipped. The recoil nearly bashed her head against the wall.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Just, keep a lookout or something yeah?”

“Sure.”

I’d noticed similar behavior several times, normally associated with any indication I was paying too much attention to her. At first I thought it fear that her vulnerable core was being analyzed for weakness, but this seemed to be a more human, psychological problem. She was afraid that ***I*** would be afraid of her, which frankly made no sense to me. Perhaps some malfunction of her emotions? I could empathise.

Once Nicole had the water shut off, I carved a hole in the pipe. The remaining water shot out under pressure, but eventually lessened enough to allow me to stick the sawed-off pipe piece into the hole, and aim it in the direction Nicole needed. Then I took a tube of sealant and made sure the pipe piece was cemented in place, using my fingers to make sure the sealant reached all the right places. Technically you weren’t supposed to touch the stuff directly, since it would fuse your fingers together, but that wasn’t a problem for me.

Once I was done, Nicole turned the water back on, and a stream of water shot out of the newly made spigot. It flew down the tunnel and into the canal flowing down the center. I didn’t notice a big change in the water flow, but Nicole assured me she had it mapped out.

“It only needs a little bit in a few different places."

“And the city won’t send someone to fix it?”

“Not if I'm planning this right. Maybe if we were closer to Central they’d catch it, but it’s a bit more lax out here.”

“I’d think they would want to keep a better eye on the areas near the wall.”

“You’d think. But tons of stuff slips through the cracks.”

“Interesting.”

“It definitely gets that way sometimes. Just remember to not go any deeper than the sewers, don’t touch anything that looks like a gizmo if you don’t know what you’re doing… oh, and don’t follow any lights.”

Hunters

They’d run into another of the snake things, as well as a few normal (but still large) rats when they explored a tunnel that had been dug into the side of the sewer. They had been starting to worry that they’d lost the trail when they found the tunnel, which led to an older maintenance shaft that was a floor lower than the sewer. The lights no longer worked, but there were pipes all over the walls that they could follow.

“Lights up ahead,” called out a hunter in front. Something was sparking in the darkness of the tunnel, looking a bit like a downed power line.

They approached the source, which turned out to indeed be a

downed power line. It was wrapped around a metal pipe that it was sparking against. Unfortunately it meant that they couldn't continue forward following the pipes. The tunnel was too narrow, and they didn't want to accidentally electrocute themselves somehow. There was more than one wire hanging down from the ceiling.

"Turn it around, we'll have to try and find a side tunnel to bypass this one."

The troop of hunters about-faced, but as luck would have it, another thick cable fell from the ceiling right in the middle of the group. It slammed into the side of one man's shoulder, knocking him to the floor.

"Holy shit! Jeffery! Jeffrey are you alright? Someone get the medkit!"

"I'm fine! I'm fine, it wasn't live," said Jeffrey.

"Jesus don't scare us like that man," said the man who had yelled. He reached down to help Jeffrey up, when the cable that had smacked Jeffrey suddenly *twitched* and slammed Jeffrey's would-be helper in the face, knocking him back.

"**Fock**! The ell? I tink my nose is broken," said the man, clutching his bloody nose.

Several hunters aimed their guns up to shine light at the offending cable. And up. And up…

Those weren't cables. The one that had smacked the hunters was attached to some kind of rock looking thing, and there was more than one of them. As they watched, the cable slowly drew back up into

it…

“Uh. Maybe we should-”

…and swiftly flew back out, attempting to slam into Jeffrey again. One hunter fired his gun at the offending rock-thing.

He really shouldn’t have.

Nicole

“Ooh! Stand back Tofu, they pack a mean punch.”

The creatures in question were attached to a wall, and had lashed out at Nicole when her arachnid half moved past and disturbed them. Her large claw took the hits without problem, and she began to scrape them off the wall with the other while they continued to pummel her.

“What are they?” asked Tofu.

“Barnacles. Well, technically I think they’re some kind of clam,” answered Nicole, “I love these things, but they’re kinda rare. They eat whatever they can catch, mostly rats, but they can’t move; they tend

to starve after the rats figure out to avoid them."

"That seems like a bad survival tactic."

"Hey, I won't complain. These things are delicious even if you eat them raw."

Nicole's brain caught up to what she'd just said. Tofu already knew she couldn't taste with her arachnid mouth, they'd talked about it when they had snacked on the cinnabons earlier. She'd basically just admitted to eating raw sewer clams. Sure, that had been well before she'd finished mutating, and it had been necessary, but still!

So embarrassing!

"Can I try one?"

"Huh?"

Tofu had of course completely ignored Nicole's embarrassment, and had approached the pile of dying clams.

"Can I have one? I've never tried these before."

"Uh, if you want? I have a hot plate with me we could cook them on."

"No need."

Tofu grabbed one of the ones that were no longer struggling, and quickly wrenched the shell open. Then he grabbed a handful of the meat and tore it out, before taking a big ol' bite and eating it. He chewed. He swallowed.

"You're right Nicole, these are good. Do you mind if I eat a few more?"

“Um. No, go ahead… but pass me one.”

*No way am **I** going to be the squemish one.*

Hunters

“Fuck. FUCK! What the hell were those!”

“Calm it down Henrick, they’re dead now,” said Abe.

The ceiling of the tunnel they were in had come alive with those tongue-things. The bolters had killed them readily enough, but they had needed to make a run for it. The group was banged up, but other than Lebowitz’s broken nose the only real injury was their pride.

“Theo is missing!”

“What?”

“I don’t see Donald either.”

“Did anyone see them get snatched?”

A head count was performed, and it turned out that a good third of the group hadn’t come out. No one had seen anyone get snatched, and the bolters had torn up the ceiling with the snatchers something fierce, so it was *unlikely* that anyone got killed. Blake was also missing, and Abe didn’t believe for a *second* that those tongue monsters had managed to put a tough bastard like Blake down. More than likely they had gone down the wrong side passage in their flight

from the tunnel, which was the reason the group hadn't split up to track the kidnap victims from the get-go. E13's sewer was like swiss cheese; the blueprints they had brought with them were almost completely useless.

"Alright here's the deal. We're gonna do some light recon in the surrounding tunnels. If we run into Blake's group we'll continue on, otherwise we're heading back topside. Standard proceedure."

The group picked itself up, and backtracked a bit before heading down the first side tunnel they could find. Hopefully they'd run into Blake's group, and this little snafu would be just another funny story.

Nicole

"This side tunnel leads to a storm drain," said Nicole.

"How can you tell?" asked Tofu.

"When it rains this one always leaks," she replied.

Tofu took a picture with his phone while Nicole stifled a giggle. *I feel like a tour guide.*

They continued down the rocky pathway they had been following. This path wasn't part of the sewers; it was a fracture in the cement structure below the subway system that the city had somehow never found. Nicole had cleared out the spiders, and used it to bypass the

subway system whenever she went north.

“What is this pipe for?” asked Tofu, pointing at a large rectangular pipe that spanned the crevice higher up.

“That, believe it or not, is one of the secret entrances to Hellion’s lair!”

“Ah. One of the elevators.”

Aww, I expected more of a reaction than that… wait.

“How’d you know she uses elevators?”

“...There’s rumors. Tim talks about hero stuff a lot.”

“Ah… ever think about becoming a hero? Your power is perfect for it.”

“Definitely not. Way too dangerous. I work in a warehouse.”

“Pfft ahahaha.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing Tofu, nothing.”

Heh. “Too dangerous.” As if he wasn’t in the tunnels trying to rescue people. Seriously Tofu, learn to lie better.

Hunters

Blake had had better days. The good news was that he'd found one of the stitch-creatures. Had the stitches and everything.

"**Fuck. You!**" Blake swung as he yelled, placing a fist squarely in the gut of a humanoid monster with the face of a rat.

Hisssssssssssss

The bad news was he'd lost his goddamn bolter.

"**Argh!**" The rat creature bent, and bit his arm. He used his other hand to stab his thumb into its eye, forcing it to let go.

Blake had been with a few other hunters who had gotten lost after the tongue monster incident. They'd been ambushed by a pack of stitch creatures from the side, and unfortunately Blake had been knocked into the smelly canal running down the middle. The rat creature in front of him had fallen in with him, and the two had been swept away as they struggled to kill each other. That's when he lost his bolter.

"Just go down you son of a bitch! I ain't dying to some stupid freak-rat!"

He kept his fists up. Trying to close in on the thing was proving to be difficult. It had claws on its 'hands' that were sharp enough to cut, let alone the teeth. If (**When!**) he got out of this, he was buying one of those hoity-toity waterproof pistols Donald was always going on

about.

He waited for openings in the rat creature's guard, and swung when he could do so without opening up his own defense. The biggest problem was the footing; they were both standing in ankle-deep water, and soaked boots did *not* outmatch clawed feet when it came to wet and slippery cement. Even the minor current threatened to drag him off his feet with one careless boot placement.

He could do this though. The creature sucked at fisticuffs, unused to fighting with its own mutilated body. He kept pounding at it, and it looked like it would run out of steam before he did. He wound up to deal a heavy blow at its exposed chin… and then *leaped* instead, dodging the thing's whiplike tail that had been sneaking under the water. He cleared the tail, and managed to weakly punch the creature's face besides, but he landed too heavily on the slippery floor, breaking his stance.

The creature kicked forward, shockingly fast (**it had been playing possum!**), and hit home on Blake's exposed knee, shattering it.

"**ARGHHH!**" screamed Blake, falling sideways into the filthy water. He resisted the urge to clutch at his broken knee, and tried to scoot himself back as fast as possible with his hands and one good leg, an almost impossible task given the slippery surface.

The rat creature advanced on him, taking its time. It knew it had him. Seems they weren't all quite as dull as they appeared.

"Fuck. Fuck!"

The rat-thing reached him and raised a clawed foot. It was going to break his other leg. It didn't need to, it had him dead to rights anyway, but it seemed whatever malevolent intelligence remained behind those black eyes wanted to toy with him.

Blake braced for the blow-

BAM BAM BAM

-and flinched at the sound of semi-automatic fire echoing through the dark tunnel. The rat-thing he had been fighting fell backwards into the water, sporting some new holes.

"Shit that was close! Are you alright?!"

"Tidus? Tidus thank God," said Blake, nearly flopping deeper into the water in his relief.

"Goddamn that was lucky. Didn't think I'd catch up."

Tidus grabbed Blake's hand, but when they tried to haul him up Blake screamed and he fell, the broken knee was too much. Another one of the hunters caught up, and together he and Tidus finally managed to get Blake to the walkway, where they began the painful process of setting the leg with a splint.

"What happened to," **argh**, "the others. Did they make it?" asked Blake.

Tidus frowned, “Most of them. We hit a sewer entrance a ways back, they… they just fucking left.”

“Heh, that’s cause they’re smart,” chuckled Blake darkly. “Not that I don’t appreciate the rescue.”

“But…”

“Listen. People die in this business. It happens. Knowing when to cut your losses is important. I had the only bolter in our group, and I fucking lost that in the shit-water. We’re heading for that manhole you mentioned and we are getting the fuck out. Abe will be doing similar with his group. Obviously we weren’t as prepared as we thought we were.”

Blake heaved himself to one foot with the help of the two other hunters.

“Now,” **agh**, “Let’s get the fuck out of this hellhole.”

Tofu

This place was great! There was so much food to eat!

Nicole and I had run into multiple organisms in the darkness of the tunnels just under the sewers.

Cheepers, which turned out to be small little swarmers that looked like fanged mouths with small legs. They couldn’t jump at all, and eating them was as simple as picking them up and chowing down as

the others uselessly gnawed at your legs (exoskeletal modifications required).

A slig, which turned out to be a giant 'slug' that spat acid (Nicole's acid was better, and melted its face off), and was especially delicious once cooked on Nicole's hotplate. Almost like bacon, but thicker.

A grue, which was a terribly misshapen humanoid with far more teeth than was beneficial. How the thing managed to eat with its mouth jammed with teeth I didn't know, but even with its bent and malformed limbs it was admittedly strong enough that Nicole had to beat it against the floor a few times to kill it. That one didn't taste good at all (bony, bitter, and gamey), and Nicole had to melt most of it down before she could eat the rest.

I was starting to see how so many animals hadn't been causing more problems for the sector. Nicole was the apex predator of the sewers, and probably consumed several tons a week in order to keep up with her metabolism. It was almost tempting to try this lifestyle myself, but Nicole soon demonstrated why that was a bad idea.

We were walking past a tunnel when some lights caught my attention. They were soft and blue in color, lightly floating above the water.

"Hey Nicole, what's that?"

She gasped and froze. I took her cue and froze as well.

After a few seconds went by, she whispered, "Tofu. Very slowly, and very quietly, keep walking. *Don't* step in the water."

I had been on the walkway when I noticed the lights, but I took a cautious few steps away from the water before continuing on. Several

tunnel intersections went by before she felt it was safe to talk.

“That was a will-o-wisp,” she said, “They’re blind, but they use those lights to attract prey. Last time I ran into one I almost died. I barely got away.”

“What do they look like?”

“Basically a subway train with teeth. They dig a burrow in the rock when they’re small, and extend it as they grow. Then they basically just sit and wait until they sense things move by, and they’re brutal when they attack. I haven’t found a way to kill them yet; so far poison and electricity haven’t worked, and they don’t seem to starve if you keep prey away from the area.”

She reached into her duffel and pulled out a map, then used a pen to mark the tunnel where the will-o-wisp was. “And that’s another tunnel I can’t use. Shit.”

I considered the problem presented by the will-o-wisp. Something didn’t make sense to me.

“Why does the city allow those to exist? Shouldn’t a hero have cleared them out by now?”

“They probably don’t know it exists yet. Will-o-wisps didn’t exist four months ago.”

“...did someone make them?”

“Maybe?”

“Why haven’t you reported them yet?”

“Because the last time I reported a problem they dumped a metric fuck-ton of tinker made neurotoxin into the sewers *and didn’t tell me*

before they did it! If I hadn't seen the bulletin on the sector website I'd be **dead**! Even then it killed *everything else!* I lost almost everything I had, and I had to travel for *miles* to find a sector that wasn't affected. Traveling down here is *dangerous*! Will-o-wisps didn't exist four months ago. Cheepers and nessies weren't around seven months ago! Grues and giant spiders have only been around for a year! The ecosystem changes *constantly*! The only permanent thing is the goddamn rats!"

She stopped talking suddenly, and turned away from me. Her hands were clenched at her sides, and every now and then a claw clacked.

"...and I'd appreciate if you not tell anyone, Tofu. I'd… I'd rather not have to move again."

"I won't tell anyone Nicole. I promise."

"...Thank you. I'm sorry for yelling."

"It's fine Nicole. I understand."

If anyone had stolen that much food from me, I'd be pissed too.

Hunters

Abe was lost. Completely and utterly lost.

Cheep

He swung his bolter around, desperately trying to see where the sound came from. Was it behind him? To the side? The *goddamn* tunnels echoed *so goddamn much!*

__Cheep__

He ran. It felt like he'd been running for hours, but in reality was more like forty minutes. His team had been beset by monster after monster, and they'd been scattered. Sometimes it was the stitch-rat things, but the Frankenstein super had tricked them, those weren't the only things in their arsenal. Teeth, claws, acid, webs, those *goddamn noisy fuckers!*

__Cheep__

"AHHHHHHHHHH!"

He ran, swinging the sight light on his bolter to have any hope of where he was going. He should have never taken this job! He should have known better than to take on a villain, and this one was goddamn *sadistic*! He was an experienced monster hunter! Shoot a few monsters, bag *one* villain, rescue a bunch of grateful victims, it had seemed so *simple*! But down in the dark tunnels, with horrors around every corner, suddenly the logic for why he came down here seemed fuzzy.

He slowed down, then dropped to his knees in exhaustion, breathing heavily. His heart was playing the drums in his ears, and he desperately tried to calm down so that he could listen for any hints of ***cheeping***.

"…"

"…"

“...and that's why backwards knees are better than forward bending knees for combat.”

What?

“Digitigrade Tofu. It's digitigrade.”

"What's that?"

People! Some of his team must have made it! Either that or he was hallucinating, but he’d take anyone right now. He forced himself to his feet, and started searching to find which tunnel the voices were coming from.

"It's not a backwards knee. Lot's of animals walk on their toes. What you're seeing is technically the heel, not a backwards knee."

"No, I'm pretty sure I'm using the knee, see?"

__Snap__ *__POP__*

"EWWWWWWWW, don't DO that!"

"You do it too!"

"Mine don't POP like that!"

He was getting closer. He began jogging for the intersection ahead where he heard the voices the loudest. Then he announced his presence before he went around the corner; no use taking a bullet from a startled team member after making it though all this.

“Hello? It’s me Abe! Don’t shoot…”

It wasn’t a team member. It was big.

He aimed his light up.

Claws. Carapace. Those ***eyes***! Cold and deadly, no hint of humanity. The eyes of a true predator, like a shark’s.

He laughed.

He raised the bolter.

“Is he dead!? Oh my God! Is he dead!?”

“Calm down Nicole. His heart is beating. I think you just knocked him out.”

The stupid man had come around the corner and almost immediately opened fire on Nicole. Her claw blocked the bolts, but in her surprise she had wacked the man rather hard, sending him flying, and breaking his gun. I was surprised at her concern for a man that had tried to kill her, but she claimed that this kind of thing was somewhat normal, and probably an accident. Humans were so *weird* about killing each other. It was his fault if he died here, but Nicole was nearly beside herself with worry.

"Okay! Okay. There should be a manhole cover just around the corner, you can carry him up and then the hospital is only a few blocks away. They should have the place running again by now."

I sighed quietly. Annoying. Guess this meant my tunnel exploration was over for now. And we had finally made it to the area around the hospital too! I slung the man over a shoulder, before letting Nicole lead me to the manhole cover.

"Thanks for escorting me today Nicole."

"Sure, sure, anytime. Just get going; getting knocked unconscious isn't good for people. Oh jeez, I hope he doesn't mutate. I'd feel so bad."

"No worries Nicole, his heartbeat really is steady. I'll take care of him."

I climbed up the ladder with the man over my shoulder. So troublesome. I couldn't have him reporting any monsters and causing problems for Nicole. Maybe I could blame any organism he saw on the stitch-rat creator. More importantly though, I had some questions

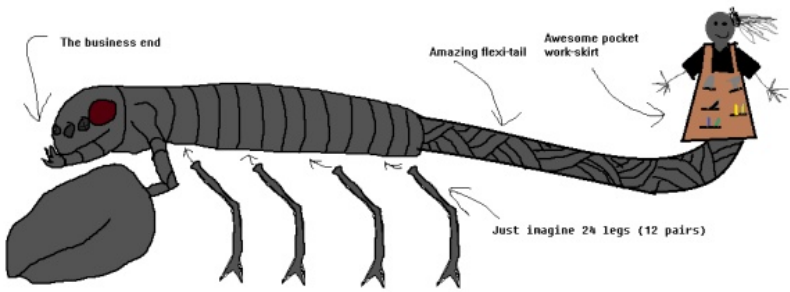
for him. I recognized lightning rounds, as well as the label on the gun. I needed to know what this was about.

Tch. Figures. A sewer system full of predators and the most dangerous thing I find is a stupid human.

A note from Gogglesbear

I made the arts (badly)

Spoiler: Nicole



Ch36 Smart Sushi

Mr. Chonkers. That was his name, and he kinda, sorta, but not really, recognized it when the Apex spoke it to him. The vibrations that made up his name were often followed up with small morsels of tasty rat meat, so Mr. Chonkers did his very best to memorize the sound. It was only natural that he was smart enough to recognize the sounds of the Apex, as he was the Alpha of his troop of “nessies” (another sound he recognized, he was just *that* good).

Once upon a time, Mr. Chonkers had been small, hiding from one shallow pool to another, scraping the barest scraps of algae from the wet stones. Now? Now he was the biggest of his troop of nessies, which was the largest troop of nessies for miles around, which by right of might made him Alpha of Alphas. When he flipped his tail flukes the females crooned. When he bit other males they squealed! None could deny that of nessies he was the greatest example. Technically this meant *he* was Apex, and he was in the eyes of his troop, but being the wise nessie that he was, he knew that that title belonged to the many-legged one.

Destroyer of the hated rats, killer of the darkest beasts, bringer of meats. The many-legged one was the true Apex, and it was in her lair that the troop sheltered. While the troop rested in her protection the rats dared not attack, and all fanged ones had been turned aside. Truly this was a paradise.

Many ages ago (five months), Mr. Chonkers had realized that the many-legged one did not kill the nessies (after two months of being bonked), and that she did not care for the scraps of her domain. He had led his troop to her tunnel, and there they had thrived, growing fat and strong, and able to push other rival troops from the prime

scraping spots.

Life had been good. But then the corrupted ones came.

They smelled of rat, but they were not rat. They had many arms and legs and claws, and they hunted his kind without mercy. There was once a balance between nessie and rat, but these newer, corrupted rats hunted everything, even the normal rats, and all the beings of the tunnels shunned them. Many an Alpha had met its end defending its troop from the corrupted ones, and Mr. Chonkers' troop had grown large from absorbing the females and beta males that survived.

At first it had been pretty great, but now it was getting kind of crowded.

Vibrations! Movement! It was coming!

Another new change. Around the same time the corrupted ones appeared, had come the False One. Always hanging around the Apex, and distracting her from giving Mr. Chonkers treats. It looked like prey but was predator. Its flesh was fresh and alive, but also a carrion shell. It tried to hide what it was, but Mr. Chonkers could tell. While blind, he could smell a patch of filmy sludge from ten tunnels away, let alone a corpse, or the delicious odor that came from the False One's sugar-rich, chemical-tainted meat shell.

Mr. Chonkers waited for the False One's vibrations to draw close… and then lunged at the False One, and was bonked for his efforts. So stingy! So mean! It would never woo the attentions of a female as large as the Apex by being so selfish!

Speaking of which…

Mr. Chonkers slipped through the water, and then bit a beta male on the flank, causing it to squeal. A just punishment for getting too close to Mr. Chonkers favorite female. *Know your place!*

Admittedly, it was hard for the beta males to put distance between themselves and his harem with so little room, but that was *their* problem!

Mr. Chonkers blew some bubbles in a show of dominance, then began searching the edges of the lair for any algae or sludge that might have turned up. It really was becoming a problem how crowded it was. Maybe the Apex was feeling generous?

He swam back to the center of the Apex's lair, but failed to feel any vibrations that would indicate the Apex was about to hand out tasty morsels. In fact…

She was gone! The False One as well! He had been too distracted, and had missed their departure. Stupid beta male! Stupid hungry tummy! Without the Apex they were all doomed! Doomed to be hunted by things with sharp teeth and no manners! Doomed to wallow- oh hey wait, what was that smell?

Mr. Chonkers and several other nessies all smelled it. The current had changed, and they could now detect several new patches of slime, as well as half a dead rat just beyond the boundaries of the Apex's

domain.

There was a mad dash for the new food sources, but Mr. Chonkers bit many flanks, and slapped his tail in many faces to get to the rat corpse first. It was a tiny morsel, only half a pound of rat, but to a nessie it was a feast.

He promptly ate half, before giving the other half to a new female that had only joined the troop two days ago, because Mr. Chonkers was a gentlenessie who knew how to woo the lassies (unlike a stingy fake he knew).

Mr. Chonkers observed the other nessies as they set about scouring the patches of slime and algae. Then he tried to think about *why* there was suddenly more food. The Apex had left. The current had shifted. They were all doomed. There was more food. The False One also left. Rats were tasty but mean. The Apex left. They were all doomed. Had he thought that already?

He put **all** of his brain power to work on trying to connect the dots. So many new things had happened, far too much for one being to put together, even if he was so smart and amazing. But, he knew that his troop was counting on the brilliant him to lead them to safety, so he didn't give up, he kept thinking with all his might and- *WHO THE HELL WAS MAKING A MATING CALL IN **HIS** TROOP!?! **HE** WAS THE ALPHA DAMNIT!*

He head arched back and forth on his long neck, the tentacles lining his mouth wriggling as he tried to detect the exact source of the vibration that signaled a male was ready to mate. He was going to bite their flank **so** hard!

The signal kept coming, louder and louder (*how big was this male*?), until it started to overwhelm him. It thrummed, it beat, it pulsed… wait. This wasn't a mating call… it was coming from… inside his own head?

The vibration pulsed from deep in his head, out of his mouth, and then out into the world. Then the echo returned, giving him a crystal clear imprint of the world around him. Nessies were good at sensing vibration, but this was at a whole other level; he was a genius!

Another pulse, and then another. Each echo bigger than the last, and each one giving him a more perfect picture of the world around him. First the tunnels around the Apex's lair, then the tunnels throughout the sector, then the entire city and beyond; he sensed it all.

He knew that a large metal thing would have a delay because a meat-walker would stick its foot in the metal thing's mouth for too long. He knew that the Traveler stalked the walls of the Fortress, seeking entry. He saw the Little Things that permeated the meat-walkers, trying to save the meat from Everything. He knew things that would happen tomorrow, or a thousand years ago, for what was time but motion, the measure of change between moments. Falling rocks that hit one after the other, transferring a wave of kinetic energy that had echoed since the Everything began? The secrets of the Everything were all his to peruse! He sensed it all and he knew it all!

Which was why he bit the male sitting next to him on the flank. The beta was going to try and woo a female Mr. Chonkers would meet a week from now. *Know your place!* The confused male squeaked in submission and swam away, as was proper. Mr. Chonkers then turned back to doing…

...what had he been doing again?

Oh right. He had to move the troop to a new den.

This one wouldn't be safe much longer.

"Sir?"

"Ugh."

"Sir? I'm going to have to insist that you wake up."

Abe's head was pounding. He felt like he'd just gotten hit by a train. He tried to open his eyes, but the bright light suddenly attacking his retinas had him clutching his head in pain.

"Are you alright sir? And what are you doing back here? If this is Odd Summer related I'm afraid I'll need some kind of answer from you."

"I, ugh. Sorry, head hurts," Abe mumbled, and tried again to open his eyes. From what he could make out, he was in some random alleyway. He didn't recognize it.

"Understandable, but considering you had an illegal weapon on you, I'm going to have to insist that you work through it and start giving

me answers."

Abe finally managed to look past the blur of sunlight and see who he was talking to. It was a cop, and he had his gun drawn and aiming at Abe from a good distance away. The sudden sight of a weapon trained on him kickstarted his brain.

"I-I'm an exterminator! Abraham Cunningham. License number four-four-six, F-six-F, six-D-six, five-six-four. I have a permit for the bolter, I was-"

It came back to him in a rush. The dark tunnels, the ambush, the run in with various horrors, those *eyes*! He suddenly sat up, then clutched his head and yelled in pain at the sudden movement. Luckily the cop had steady nerves, or he might have gotten shot. He sputtered as he tried to get words out. "M-my team! W-we were- **ugh**."

"Woah there, take it easy," replied the cop, "I'll check your badge number and you just take your time, no rush."

The cop gingerly removed his phone and started punching numbers, not putting away the gun but lowering the aim so it wasn't pointed at Abe. Couldn't blame the cop for being careful; if you thought getting called in for monsters was bad, try dealing with a domestic dispute during Odd Summer. Abe didn't envy his job.

Although some days the monsters were definitely worse.

"Alright, looks like it checks out," said the cop, holstering his weapon. "Think you're up for telling me what happened? This have something to do with what happened at the hospital?"

"Yes, my team and I were hired to try and track the creatures responsible. We were told the villain who made them was a puppeteer; our intel must have been faulty. The sewers were damn near crawling with life. M-my team… I doubt any of them made it…"

Abe's thoughts spiraled at that. You lost people in this business sometimes, but this was an unmitigated disaster. If he hadn't had the bolter he would be dead as well. Speaking of which…

"Where's my bolter? I had it on me." Did the cop take it? Abe didn't see it on him. He tried to get to his feet, but stumbled. Did he have a concussion? It felt like a concussion.

"Before that, you said there's stuff in the sewers?" asked the cop, offering him a hand up. "A puppeteer you said?"

"I don't think it's a puppeteer, I think it's a tinker," replied Abe. It must have been a concussion, his head felt so foggy. His brain seemed to be having trouble putting one thought in front of the other. "There were so many varieties, and the ones who attacked the hospital were different, those all had stitches… it might be more than one super. I'd bet money on at least one tinker, some of those things, they were… they were *breeding* down there."

"Well. I'll call it in and hopefully they can get a hero on it pronto," said the cop.

"Does this sector have a hero who can handle large scale infestations? My team wouldn't be able to handle that many even if we were ... even if we were at full strength."

"I'm sure we can find someone to handle it."

"*Are you not hearing me?!*" yelled Abe, grabbing the front of the cop's shirt. It felt waxy, almost like plastic, or maybe cheap synthetic silk. "There is a **major** infestation in this sector! Screw calling in a hero! This sector should be in lockdown and the sewers purged! If those things get out into the city at large we could be facing a disaster!"

"...can you let go of my shirt please sir?" said the cop.

Abe realized what he was doing and released the cop. Outburst over, he wavered unsteadily and the cop had to help keep him from falling back to the ground.

"Either way, I think the first thing is to get you medical attention," said the cop, slowly getting one of Abe's arms over his shoulder and

supporting him so he could walk. “No worries, I’ll report this monster business in to my superiors and they’ll handle it from there. You on the other hand need to get to a hospital. Come on, it’s right around the corner.”

“Right, alright…”

They started heading down the alleyway, which was between tall buildings and sheltered from the main roads surrounding the block. How did Abe even get here? The last thing he remembered was the thing with the eyes in the sewer. He’d tried to shoot it, and the next thing he knew he was miraculously aboveground, if a bit worse for wear.

“Wait, my bolter,” said Abe, suddenly remembering. *Damn this concussion*. He couldn’t leave the bolter, his company had only had the four of them, and after today it seemed unlikely they’d be able to replace the ones they *did* lose. Bolters and similar tools were vital for people in his profession, but the tinker made weapons didn’t come cheap, and without them the company might collapse. *And what’s left of my team shouldn’t lose their jobs on top of everything else.*

“It’s over here,” said the cop. The bolter had been placed on the lid of a random trash can against the wall of the alley. It seemed almost sacrilegious to see the high-tech weapon lying among the common garbage of the day. *You’d think he’d put it somewhere better than a random trash can. Couldn’t his partner have held onto it?… Wait a minute*. Where was the cop’s partner? Cops did not work alone as a rule, and during Odd Summer you **never** saw them alone.

How had he gotten out of the sewer? Where was the cop’s partner? Something in Abe’s addled brain finally clicked, *this wasn’t a cop.* The cop’s uniform, his phone, his gun, none of them had been quite right,

none of them standard issue.

He could feel his adrenaline start to flow, but he didn't take any action that would show his hand. His bolter, once he had that he'd be fine. It didn't look like the fake cop was going to stop him from retrieving it.

"Damn, what gave me away?" asked the cop.

Abe didn't wait a second. His hand moved to grab the fake cop's gun (definitely not a standard police taser gun), and then he shoved the cop while pulling the gun from the holster, adrenaline and nerves and training temporarily making up for the concussion.

He trained the gun on the strangely relaxed cop, "Alright you son of a bitch. I don't know who the fuck you are, but-"

The gun dissolved in his hands. One second it was a hefty, eight-cylinder revolver that looked a bit like a police gun. The next second it might as well have been sand for how it crumbled.

Abe turned and lunged for the bolter. His opponent was a super! The bolter was his only hope.

He grabbed the bolter. Turned. Aimed. Fired.

The bolter let out a whine and then **exploded**, taking most of Abe's

right hand with it.

"**AAAAGHHHH!**"

"Yeah, I should have mentioned it was broken."

"**AGH,** my hand! My fucking hand!"

"Yes, it's pretty bad. Not enough to trigger mutavus though, unless we let you bleed out. Come on, the hospital is close by and you really do need medical help now. Maybe if you restrain your unnecessary outbursts and think a bit more we can actually improve your situation."

The fake cop casually walked over to Abe and offered him a hand up, then thought better of it since Abe was using his only uninjured hand to staunch the bleeding. Abe flinched when the man put a hand on his shoulder, but when it became apparent the cop was only helping him up Abe let him. At this point his addled mind was barely keeping up. The cop wasn't a cop, but he was helping him? Confusion and pain were the only things going through Abe's distracted mind, and if the cop wasn't actually out to get him then Abe wouldn't question it. Instead he tried to just concentrate on staying standing.

Which made it quite simple for the "cop" to stab a knife into the base of Abe's skull and up into his brain, killing him instantly.

Such a waste.

I tried to do as Nicole wanted, but in the end the human just proved

too stupid to save. At some point after I tried to help him to the hospital, he figured out I wasn't a real police officer, and since I was helping him walk I was close enough to smell the flood of adrenaline when he realised I wasn't who I said I was.

I wonder what gave me away? Admittedly there were several flaws in my disguise, but it was the best idea I could think of to get willing answers out of him. The only thing better would have been a hero, but that would have made it impossible to avoid notice, and I would have been under far harsher scrutiny if I tried to bring the exterminator to the hospital. The police disguise was my attempt to get answers and remain undiscovered long enough to leave him with medical help. So much for *that* plan.

In the end what finally sealed his fate was him pulling the fake gun I made. Any of his other outbursts would have been fine, even when he blew off his own hand, but pulling the fake pistol I made and discovering my ability meant I needed to get rid of him. The way my micro units dissolved was too easily identifiable at this stage, and I couldn't have my criminal exploits be associated with Nicole. If he told his story of encountering a giant scorpion mutant, and then someone with 'dissolving pieces', well, that would just cause too much trouble for everyone involved. A shame too, I put a lot of effort into making that gun seem real, despite not having the time to perfect it. The next time I got my hands on one I'd make sure to dismantle it for the smaller details, along with a whole police officer if possible.

I finished my dismantling and disposal of the corpse, and put my disguise back to normal before leaving the alleyway. Then I started to make my way to the closest elevator back to Hellion's base.

From what I'd learned from the interrogation, the man was part of an

‘exterminator team’ whose job it was to remove dangerous organisms from the environment. The good news was that he wasn’t affiliated with New Dawn Inc. beyond buying their weaponry, so I didn’t need to worry about problems from that vector for now. The bad news was that he was part of a team, which meant that multiple people whose job it was to kill monsters now knew the sewers were crawling with them. I didn’t know how many of them there were, and hunting them down simply wouldn’t be effective. Even if I managed to find and kill them all, an entire team going missing would have been proof enough that the sewers needed purging.

So. The next plan of action was to ask for help like Sandra said to do. This situation with the stitch-rat creator had become too complicated for me to investigate by myself. I’d wind up bringing down either the cops or the capes on my head if I tried to do this alone.

Speaking of which, where were the heroes in all this? Shouldn’t they be taking care of this stitch-rat person by now? Annoying. I no longer needed this stitch-rat creator to create materials for me seeing as I had a sewer full of interesting resources. Now I needed this super out of the way before the city purged my new hunting ground. Not taking care of this problem when it showed up was “coming back to bite me” (I liked that idiom, it made sense). In the future I’d need to be more careful about putting things off for later.

Which is why the next step would be to fill out an after-action report for this last job *before* asking Sandra for help.

Heroes

Nicole hadn't been kidding when she said will-o-wisps could become the size of subway trains.

THUNK* *WHAM

One particularly large specimen had carved out an equally large den for itself at the bottom of a wide sewer canal, and had used the prime location to grow quite fat on passing fauna.

CRUNCH* *ROOOOAAAARRRRGLGELGLL

In fact, it had sensed a particularly juicy looking morsel, and had tried to make a quick snack out of it only to find out said morsel was a bit more than it could chew.

"Yo bossman you need any help!?" asked Turbo.

"I'm fine! Just stand back, and watch the tail!" replied Brick.

As if determined to prove Brick wrong, the will-o-wisp whipped its head (with Brick clenched in its jaws) into the side of the tunnel. Then again into the opposite side, cement chips and masonry exploding with each impact. It looked like the world's angriest eel thrashing a chew toy.

Finally the will-o-wisp stopped thrashing, and instead looked like it was trying to grind its prospective meal into paste against the stone wall. Unfortunately for it, Brick was tougher than the... well, bricks.

There was a quiet moment of tension, and then the will-o-wisp was forced back from the wall. Inch by inch, and then step by step, the eel-thing was forced to give ground. Brick had one hand on a fang in the creature's upper mouth and another on the lip of its lower jaw. Carefully, and with one final shove, Brick forced its mouth wide and

then quickly jammed a stoney foot into the creature's mouth and stomped down, opening up its mouth farther than even its wide jaw was supposed to go. The creature tried to pull away or thrash, but the foot that wasn't in the creature's mouth was anchored into the pavement where Brick had stomped a hole. Gripping the upper teeth with both hands now, Brick shoved, ***hard***. The creature's jaw *streeeeetched* and ***snapped***, and the creature roared its pain into Brick's face.

Brick just grunted in reply. Then he reached farther into the will-o-wisps broken jaw and punched into the underside of the creature's palate. Once, twice, the meaty **twacks** echoing down the sewer were mirrored by the creature's roars. Then with one final punch his fist broke through, right into the creature's brain.

That… didn't quite kill the thing. Apparently the brain was merely window dressing for the will-o-wisp's brutal instincts, so Brick was forced to dig a bit deeper before the creature gave its last shuddering roar and died. Then he had to dig his way out, an overall messy affair. He was covered in the thing's red/purple blood, and his tinker-treated clothes had been shredded, just barely leaving him decent (those teeth had been *sharp*).

"Damn bossman. You alright?" asked Turbo.

"Fine. You find them?" Brick didn't spare a moment.

Turbo grimaced, "Three of em. Brought em topside and left them with cops."

"Just **three**?!"

Turbo flinched, but then scowled, "Yeah. Just three. Those things all scattered in different directions. There's miles of tunnel man, and it's dangerous shit. I can't run up the walls if I fall into some fucking snake hole in the middle of nowhere, you know that! Like I *want* to

not find them huh? Well you can-"

"I'm sorry," said Brick suddenly, raising a hand to stop Turbo's tirade before it really got going. "That came out wrong. I'm just worried about them."

Turbo frowned, but muttered, "Yeah, me too."

Brick took a deep breath, "Alright. We need to make a few calls, see if any better suited supers in the surrounding sectors can spare the time to help us find this prick. Otherwise we need to call Magenta in and search the sewers together as a team."

Turbo hesitated, "I hate to bring it up, but maybe we should call for a lockdown? That'd get us real help in a hurry, and its not like we can't claim legitimate need with shit like this in the sewers."

"I considered it, but if we call this in and say the sewer's infested, what's the first thing you think Central will do? Lend us a super, or just gas the sewers?"

"...shit."

"Right. So until further notice, all this crap..." Brick kicked the dead eel-thing, "...is because of one rogue puppeteer, and we just need someone to help find him."

"You got it boss. I'll run ahead and start making those calls."

"Alright, and um… mind running me some fresh duds? I'm afraid these are going to fall off if I shift back," said Brick, gesturing at his torn and bloody clothes.

"Hahaha, you need to find a real suit bossman. I'll see what I can do," laughed Turbo, and with that he was gone, the air rustling briefly in the wake of his rapid exit.

"Tch, easier said than done," muttered Brick. You could get clothes that fit shapeshifters, and clothes that could withstand what bruisers like Brick went through, but both? Good luck. Tinker clothes were expensive as it was, and Central wasn't quite willing to foot the bill for "non-vital" equipment. Non-vital his bare ass, he needed pants

dammit!

He started making his way back to the entrance he'd used to enter the sewers, pondering the situation as he did so. Things were… somewhat worse than he had discussed with Turbo. After the incident in the mall, Brick had gone digging through the missing persons' files again, and he had found a discrepancy. Of the missing people in the files, almost thirty percent were mutants, far higher than any other demographic. E13 had a larger population of mutants than most sectors, even the other outer sectors, but even then the ratio was still only one mutant per twenty people or so. The disappearances on record started just a few days before Odd Summer officially started, which meant this villain had probably been one of the first new triggers of the summer, and had been lying low while they stockpiled… parts.

Brick had to resist punching the wall and possibly damaging it. It made a sick sort of sense really. From the analysis on the corpses, their forensics had determined that the victims needed to be alive when the surgery was performed, or at least… fresh. Normally any villain that targeted civilians in such a way would wind up dead when a victim inevitably triggered or mutated out of control, but if you started off with mutants? Well, no chance of a trigger, and they were already mutated. There were hundreds of missing people's files on record, both in and around E13; how many of those missing people were now trapped in a lightless cell in some super villain's lair? They'd die along with the villain and the sewer life if Central decided to take the easy way and gas the sector.

The thought both angered Brick and… shamed him. Such a noticeable uptick in mutant disappearances should have been noted before now. Sure, it could be partially blamed on the fact the disappearances had started right before the feud between Hellion and the Espada reached its fiery conclusion, but more likely… more likely it had just been sort of ignored. Brick tried to remain impartial as

best he could, but he wasn't blind to the fact that the vast majority of people wished that mutants would just disappear. The attitude was everywhere, even if people didn't voice it. They were afraid they would catch mutavus themselves, or if they were informed enough to know you didn't 'catch' mutavus, they still just didn't like having walking reminders that they could become monsters around. Hell, how often had he heard slurs like 'cockroach' muttered by police officers and heroes, and even his own teammates?

Brick reached the sewer entrance ladder and sighed. Turbo wasn't back yet, and he'd need to drop his shift to climb the ladder. He did so, and miracle of miracles, his pants actually stayed on. He used the torn scraps of his shirt to help cover some of the worst spots, and then climbed the ladder. He was still covered in viscera from the eel-thing, and he needed to be careful not to slip, but he wasn't about to wash off using sewer water. Besides, something like this was nothing to the grim task ahead of him. Taking on this villain would likely be far, far worse than some overgrown eel brain bits.

He reached the top and climbed out, the manhole cover hadn't been replaced since he last used it. Outside on the street, he was surrounded by the normal three to four story buildings of northern E13. Colorful and hodgepodge from all the modifications over the years, he had always thought the buildings brought a charm to E13 that you couldn't find in other sectors. They created a colorful tableau that heroes of E13 had never had the heart to call city planners to fix, and Brick shared those sentiments.

Which made the bombed out and fire damaged building across from him all the more painful. This particular building used to have some of the most colorful and intriguing modifications in the whole sector, and it wouldn't have been wrong to say that this was the origination point of all such modifications.

Yes, Brick and his team definitely had a grim task ahead of them. After all, what kind of sick monster attacked an orphanage?

Ch37 Monster Mashed Potatoes

A note from Gogglesbear

Just in case you missed it, take a moment to goggle at this awesome artwork of Nicole PurpleGloom made:

Spoiler: Spoiler

Was your identity (or the identity of any HH employee) compromised?: No.

Were you, or any fellow employee, injured in a way that required major medical care (bone fractures/lacerations/missing limbs/ etc)?: No.

Were there any fatalities (including civilian, hero, or otherwise)? If so, were they caused by an employee of Hellion's Henchmen?:

That last question was a tough one. Technically people did die during the job, but not *because* of the job. I knew of the one civilian at the hospital, and of course the exterminator.

Hmmm...

I suppose I'd just note the civilian in the hospital, but not the exterminator. Abe technically died *after* the job was already done, which I think counts as me being "off the clock."

I jotted it down, and took another bite of my burger.

After disposing of the exterminator, I called Nicole to let her know that everything had gone fine. Abe hadn't mutated (truth), and I had handed him off to a medical professional at the hospital (lie). I kinda wanted to continue our search of the sewers for a bit, but Nicole insisted I stay long enough for the doctors to give a final verdict on Abe's health. That resulted in me heading to Maggie's Sunrise Diner to get some tofu burgers to-go (it had been just a bit too long since the last time I went there), while I texted fake updates about Abe's health to Nicole. After a quick stop at my apartment to pick up a spare after-action report (and drop off all the nifty souvenirs I got in the sewer), I then headed off back to the HH main base because I didn't have a pen to write with. Now I was sitting in the HH cafeteria eating my burgers, while filling in the report, and chatting with Nicole via text.

Normally, this would make me ‘happy’ (and I was), but there were other emotions cluttering my thought patterns as well, and I was trying to parse what caused each one.

Happy: because I was eating Tofu burgers.

Uneasy: because I was lying to Nicole. I didn’t really like to lie. Depending on who you told them to (and who *they* told them to), lies could be all too easily discovered, and being caught in a lie could compromise my disguise.

Regret: the exterminator had been a valuable resource to Fortress city. Keeping hostile organic life controlled was a vital function, and even if he seemed somewhat incompetant, his death was a waste of resources.

Guilt: this had been the first time I needed to kill someone who wasn’t directly threatening my life, and the need to do it was partly my fault because of my imperfect disguise. I didn’t really lik-

> Human.exe emergency shut-down;
>
> Human.exe displaying behavior harmful to core: analyzing…
>
> Emotion: Regret: a feeling of sadness, repentance, or disappointment over something that has happened or been done.
>
> Feeling regret due to lost resources: useful to core survival. Allowed.
>
> Emotion: Guilt: Feeling responsible or regretful for a perceived offense, real or imaginary.
>
> Feeling guilt in response to defending core social-background disguise and assets: harmful to core survival. Denied.
>
> Rolling back thought process kernel...

Rewriting...

Restarting Human.exe;

Regret: the exterminator had been a valuable resource to Fortress city. Keeping organic life controlled was a vital function, and even if he seemed somewhat incompetant, his death was a waste of resources.

Disappointment: Nicole was currently texting me that the nessies had all disappeared!

Nicole: I just can't believe they're all gone. I must have gotten something wrong with the current

[image]

Tofu: No worries Nicole. We can just reverse the changes and then lure them back with food.

Nicole: I looked around. They aren't close by, they could be anywhere!

Tofu: I have a good nose, we'll find them.

Of course, there was also the possibility that a predator had eaten them or chased them away. Unlikely given Nicole would have mentioned blood if she found it, but it couldn't be discounted. I neglected to bring up that possibility, as she seemed distraught enough as it was.

While I 'brainstormed' methods of finding the nessies with Nicole, I continued to fill out my report and eat my burgers. The cafeteria

wasn't very full at this time of day, but there were always people heading from one part of the base to another, and they needed to go through the cafeteria since it was also technically the base's main hub room. It was because of this that I noticed Imp, Socket, and Sandra entering the cafeteria area, along with a Tinker Tot. It was the same young, four-armed Tinker Tot that I had taken the slingshot from.

This was quite the unusual event, as only trusted clients were allowed in the base on non-training days. Security was… interestingly handled among Hellion's Henchmen. Some minions didn't care at all about their identities being discovered, while others were concerned almost to the point of inefficient paranoia. In order to keep their employees' identities safe, HH implemented a multitude of policies such as: keeping much of the record-keeping on paper, constant 'firmware updates' to masks using Socket's own personal network, and a company policy that anyone caught revealing others' identities would be "personally barbecued by Hellion."

That last one was probably the most important one, seeing as it was the only one enforced with death. Even betraying Hellion's plans to the authorities only resulted in "termination of employment" and an understanding that HH would not pay out your last paycheck (although I had been warned that few villains would rehire such a minion, and many in fact took personal offense to 'traitors').

Sandra led the Tinker Tot to a seat at one of the tables, and the youth sat down listlessly, staring at the tabletop. He wasn't really participating in the conversation despite Sandra's attempts to engage him, and Socket had a furious scowl on his face as he muttered to Imp (which in his case was more like restrained yelling). If what Socket was saying was correct, the Tinker Tot base had been hit by rat-creatures, a concerning event considering the rat-creatures had also hit the hospital. These attacks were escalating fast.

I got up from my table, intending to speak with them about the

possible sewer purge I wanted to prevent. If HH was going to assist the Tinker Tots with the rats, then now was the best time to-

Ring-a-ding-ding! Ring-a-ding-ding!

Odd. That was Nicole's ringtone.

click "Hello?"

"Tofu!" said Nicole in a harsh whisper, "I-I think I found one of those rat-things. It, ohmigod..."

"Nicole?!"

"Tofu it has human parts. Oh God...."

"Nicole where are you?"

"I'm at home, I t-think it must have followed me back, it-"

"Nicole!?"

"There's two of them!. It… it has a human head! Oh my God, what if that's a person?!"

"Nicole listen to me. The ones I fought at the hospital were not strong enough to cause you trouble."

"I-I d-don't know if I can h-hit them."

"They aren't as fast as rats, and they aren't much stronger."

"NO! T-t-t-tofu I-I can't hit a p-per-perso-"

"They are **not** people! Do whatever you have to do to defend yourself. Run if you can't hit them."

"O-okay. I'll r-run… oh no..."

“Nicole!?”

“...There’s more of them. I-I'm surrounded. I-I’m going to call nine-one-one!"

“Um… alright, do so. I’m on my way as well Nicole.” It would complicate things, but if there was a chance a hero could get to her first then it was best to call.

“A-alright. I’ll call back if I can,” and with that she hung up to call emergency services. I myself had someone else I needed to ask.

“Sandra my friend is being attacked by the stitch-rat creatures, can I use the emergency elevators?”

All four of them, Sandra, Imp, Socket, and the Tinker Tot, looked at me. I had interrupted their conversation and they seemed somewhat stunned by my request. Had I been rude? But I didn’t have time for social niceties.

“This is a time-sensitive request.”

Imp was the first to respond, “Kid, if this is some kind of bad joke…”

“It’s not,” interrupted Sandra, “Is it Mikey in trouble? Where?”

“It’s another friend. Manchineel St, south of Ashwood," I answered.

“Imp can you-”

“On it Sandra. Tofu walk with me,” said Imp. It was more of a fast jog.

The Tinker Tot spoke up, “I’ll come too!”

“Oh no you won’t,” replied both Sandra and Socket. They began saying things to mollify the distraught tot, but I was soon too far to

hear it.

Imp led me to one of the elevators and placed his thumb on the button, holding it down for five seconds. The button panel then flipped out from the wall, revealing a numbered pad. He began rapidly hitting buttons.

“Let’s see. Today is Monday, so it should be… unless Socket updated again… ah good,” finished Imp, punching in the last number. The door opened a second later, and we both got on. “You said it was Manchineel St? Give me some areas around it.”

I listed a few, and he punched in a destination for the elevator on the inside panel. Then the doors closed, and the elevator took off at a much higher speed than normal.

“Alright, give me the low-down. Short version.”

“Stitch-rats have my friend cornered in the sewer below Manchineel St. She should be strong enough to fight them off, but she’s panicking, and at last contact she said she was going to call nine-one-one.”

“Ugh, wonderful. So she doesn’t know you’re a minion?”

“No. She does know about my power though.”

“Tricky… if we get there before the heroes we’ll need to go in guns blazing to get her out before they come. You prepared to let her know about your night-job?”

“Yes. Her survival is more important.”

“Good answer.”

I had several key priorities. First was Nicole's survival, without her I would lose access to the biological resource that was the sewers. Second was to not allow the heroes to know I was an acquaintance of Nicole, as that might result in her having to move sectors or in the heroes detaining her. Third was to attempt and keep my night-job secret from Nicole, but… I doubted that would be possible if we had to engage. It wasn't guaranteed that Nicole would cut ties with me if she found out, so this was a far lower priority.

The elevator came to a sudden stop and opened, and immediately my phone began to ring; the shielding on the elevator must have been preventing the signal from reaching me. I picked up immediately.

"Nicole?"

"**TOFU**! Oh thank God! I-I couldn't g-get through to you! They-**sob**-they s-said they didn't find any disturbance! The operator hung up bef-fore I could explain I was below the street! -**sob**- T-tofu they all have f-faces!"

Damn, she was really panicking now. Nicole had handled all of the organisms we encountered in our exploration with decisiveness and without mercy. I had not expected that she would have such a problem with these stitch-creatures, but I suppose I should have; Nicole had been overly worried about the exterminator she hurt, and she avoided violent news whenever possible. It just hadn't occurred to me that she avoided it because it was violence that involved people.

"Nicole I'm almost there! Remember to use crowd-fighting tactics, the designs I witnessed should be slow enough to-"

"God you suck at this," said Imp, teleporting my phone out of my hand and into his, "Nicole? This is Tofu's boss speaking, we're almost

to you. Sit tight and be brave, cavalry is almost there," then to me he said, "I'm going ahead. Switch your helmet to channel seven and get there as fast as you can," and with that he was gone, teleported… with my phone.

I shifted my legs into running configuration and took off; the elevator let out in an abandoned apartment building, and I knew where I was going from here. While I ran I flooded my system with extra micro units, and began preparing for any rapid shifting I would have to do. It sounded like I would need to brawl with a crowd of these stitch-creatures, so size and strength would be better than perfect precision, but I still needed to fit into the sewer entrance… ah, that reminded me. I didn't get to tell Imp that-

"Hey Tofu?" said Imp suddenly, coming in through my helmet, "Next time when I ask for the low-down, maybe mention that your friend ***is a giant scorpion!***"

"Sorry, I was getting to that."

The run to Nicole's place was… 'nerve-wracking'. I didn't have time for stealth, and caused somewhat of a ruckus among the civilians that saw me. At the very least they got out of my way. I also spotted the police patrol car that had most likely done the poor check of Nicole's street.

Incompetents.

It was tempting to spit some slugs through their windshield, but catching the attention of heroes would be a hindrance at this point, so I ducked through an alley to avoid being seen. In the end, it took me eight whole minutes to get to Nicole's from the elevator exit. Not a lot of time, but in combat every second counted. My only solace was that Imp was keeping me updated, which meant they weren't

dead.

I reached the entrance I normally used. The manhole cover was already moved aside, and so I took the quickest way and just jumped in feet-first, being careful not to catch a limb on the way down, and extending my legs to absorb the eventual impact. Just before I reached the bottom, I braced.

Increasing reaction speed to 300%, 5 second burn;

I hit bottom, my legs taking the impact without problem, and I quickly scanned the area for what I was dealing with. I was somewhat surprised, Nicole was out of her den and defending the intersection that led to it. Imp was defending the other end of the sewer tunnel with his pistols, shooting any stitch-creatures that approached with a headshot. His teleporting power meant they couldn't grab him, and every bullet hit its mark. Things didn't look to bad actually.

"Tofu!?" yelled Nicole. Her scorpion half was fighting the stitch-creatures, but her human half looked bedraggled. She had quite obviously been crying.

"It's me!" I yelled back over the sound of Imp's gunfire. My mask was firmly in place for combat; no use hiding my job now.

Nicole reacted strangely, her human half shooting towards me as her tail stretched, and she wrapped her arms around me in a 'hug'. Then she began sobbing again, which really confused me.

"Nicole? You appear safe, you don't have to be sad?...Um, this is detrimental to my combat performance."

"Pfft," croaked Nicole, but she let me go.

"That's great you two," said Imp, "but how about you come and help

me over here Tofu? I'm deducting these bullets from your paycheck you know."

Ack! Those things were expensive!

I moved to help Imp, extending my limbs to my prefered combat position before engaging the stitch-creatures. These ones were slightly different from the last ones I encountered, there was definitely more human parts in this batch, with several of them having humans heads like Nicole had noted. They didn't seem much more intelligent for it, although a few of them used crude weapons, and one or two of them were slightly faster and more coordinated. It seemed the Frankenstein-wannabe worked fast; the hospital raid had only been about four hours ago.

We settled into a rhythm, Nicole and I defending the two ends of the tunnel, and Imp teleporting between us to quickly shoot any stitch-creatures that got past us (mostly he helped me though). Nicole still flinched every time she dispatched a creature with a human face, but it seemed our presence helped her mental state immensely, and she now held one of the heavier wrenches she kept on her with her human hands, just in case she needed to whack a creature that got past her claws.

I lashed out with a hand and ripped a stitch-creature's head off. Then I used the roundhouse kick I learned from Adder to break both legs of a rather tall specimen. It worked nicely, sending it falling onto one of its comrades and allowing me time to stab them both through an eye with a knife. I wasn't even needing to spit my slugs that often, which was great. The small hill of corpses that had formed was really starting to pile up, the pile in front of Nicole actually clogging the canal that ran down the tunnel. I was starting to think we might actually clog the whole tunnel to the ceiling when the creatures

finally started to pull back.

“Whew, about time,” said Imp, “Not the smartest things around, are they? I thought they’d never give up. You both okay?”

“I-I think so,” said Nicole.

“I’m fine,” I replied. I had spent quite a bit of energy going full-throttle to not be overwhelmed, but that could be easily replaced with the amount of creatures we killed.

“Nice, then in that case I say we pack up and skedaddle. This place isn’t really secu-”

ROOOOAAAARRRRGLGELGLL

“...the fuck was that?”

It came from the direction of Nicole’s den, and it was **loud**.

“Oh no… it can’t be,” said Nicole as she backed up.

ROOOOAAAARRRRGLGELGLELELGELL

“Um, Nicole? What is that?"

“...It’s a will-o-wisp. D-don’t make any sudden moves, that makes them angry.”

I heard a *very* big splash. And then around the corner, from the tunnel that led to Nicole's den, extended the head of one of the largest and *ugliest* creatures I had ever seen. And I don't use that descriptor often.

It was a grimy brown color, with slime dripping off of its puckered hide in ropes. The face had never had eyes, and two human heads had been stapled approximately where eyes would go on a different organism. At some point in the recent past its jaw had been utterly destroyed, the remains hanging loosely. The rat-stitcher had "fixed" this problem by stapling arms of all shapes and sizes around the orifice to act as a new means of shoveling food into its open gullet (a poor parody of a nessie's mouth). Atop its head, a long antenna flopped to the side, and gave off a faint phosphorescence that had faded to a mere memory of the attractive lights I had seen with Nicole.

It was inefficient. Poor design. A hash-job done by the truly incompetent and uninspired. A waste of a good body, and a disgusting misuse of resources. Unfortunately, none of that would help us, as the will-o-wisp could probably kill us all just by flopping onto us. How did it even fit through the tunnels!?

It stopped in front of the pile of bodies Nicole had made, and started shoveling them into its mouth one after the other. Whether it was under orders to retrieve bodies or was just following its own instincts was impossible to tell.

"Let's leave while its distracted," whispered Imp.

We started slowly backing up, but immediately ran into a problem. We thought the stitch-creatures had been retreating, but they had actually been gathering behind us while we were distracted. The

other end of the tunnel was practically choked with them! We'd never break through that many before the will-o-wisp noticed.

Imp could of course teleport, and I could just use the manhole exit, but Nicole was stuck. It seemed she knew it too; she was shivering, and she was muffling her whimpers with a hand.

"Nicole. Nicole! Try to squeeze as far up the exit ladder as you can. I'll try to carve away the stone," I whispered.

Slowly, so as not to disturb the will-o-wisp, I tip-toed towards the ladder with Nicole in tow. I started to climb the ladder, and the stitch-creatures that had blocked us off growled and started to move forward.

ROOOOAAAARRRRGLGELGLL

The will-o-wisp apparently didn't like the noise interrupting its meal, and everyone (including the stitch-creatures) froze in place. It seemed that even their substandard intelligence knew not to piss it off. A few seconds passed before the will-o-wisp went back to its meal. Damn it was stupid; I knew it could see us getting away with the heads stapled to it, but it seemed to not respond to visual stimuluse at all, only sound and vibrations… and maybe smell?

I went up the ladder, with Nicole following behind me. Her torso and tail fit easily, but when it came to her leg sections it was a *very* tight squeeze. The fact that her legs were thin, flexible, and strong worked to her advantage, but she still had to double up most of her joints to fit. The odd angles meant she could only lift herself a few inches at a time. I started to climb the ladder doubletime; the biggest bottleneck would be the manhole at the top, she'd never fit more than her tail

through, and I needed to carve sections away. I reached the top, and immediately started using a tendril of micro-units extended from my palm to start drilling through the stone.

It was slow going; the cement used was a durable composite which my micro units had trouble with. I burned through my sugar supply to produce as many micro units as I could. This was going to be sloppy, but there was *no time*.

Imp appeared next to me, “Hey uh, that pile it’s eating is almost gone. Any way to speed this up?”

“Can you teleport sections away?”

“Not if they’re still attached.”

“I’m drilling seperate holes, hopefully that will weaken it enough for Nicole to break through. Here...” I was using both hands to carve away cement now, so I extended a tendril from my shoulder which quickly began to swell at the end, becoming an odor decoy like I had used at the mall. “When this detaches throw it at the will-o-wisp. Hopefully it should distract them.”

The decoy dropped into his hands, and he immediately teleported away. I went back to carving rock, using brute force to rip away chunks as my micro-units completed their work. Nicole managed to backpedal far enough up the tunnel that her torso could reach me, and she started breaking through the cement chunks I had weakened by herself (she really was strong).

“I can keep working here Tofu, I need you to help at the other end. My um, claws are stuck. I need you to cut them off.”

“Alright.”

I clambered back down the tunnel, squeezing past Nicole's leg segments; luckily I didn't need room to breath. I was hearing a bunch of gunshots echoing from below, and then I was surprised when two large ***BOOM***s suddenly drowned out the commotion, followed by a bellowing roar that vibrated the walls almost more than the explosions.

Imp's voice came from my helmet, "Alright kids time to ***fucking*** go! Thing swallowed two grenades and its still chugging."

"I just need to-"

WHAM A crash echoed from below, Nicole screamed, and suddenly her entire body got pulled down the tunnel several feet. Several of her legs broke, and the ladder bent with the sheer force that tugged her down.

"Nicole, spit acid on it!"

"I'm trying! It's not working!"

I fell another few meters as another tug pulled Nicole even farther down.

"***IT'S SWALLOWING ME!***"

Damn, if it had a firm grip on her front I wouldn't be able to do anything there.

"***TOFU! MY TAIL! CUT MY TAIL!***"

Of course!

I reversed course yet again, rapidly shifting the tendrils I had used to dig through the stone. I was burning fuel so fast my arms were literally heating up, and I needed to vent some liquid mass to shed the heat. The blood steamed and powdered as it dripped out of me, and I climbed to the accompaniment of Nicole's hysterical screaming and Imp's gunshots as he tried to get the will-o-wisp off her. I was almost at her tail section.

"AHHHHHHH I'M GOING TO DIE!"

Quite possibly. Here's hoping this worked. The tendrils I used to carve the rock were now hardened into spikes with a sharp edge down the side, and I stabbed them into the meat of her tail, doing my best to puncture all the way through and immediately dumping micro units into her.

"***AAAAAAHHHHHH!***"

Ah, seems that really hurt. Hopefully that didn't mean there was anything vital here. I kept flooding her tail with micro units and also started cutting with the edge. It was so much easier for me to disassemble organic matter (I was built for it after all). My micro units easily slashed their way through organic cells the same size as themselves, or bonded to cell structures and self-destructed, ripping everything apart in chain reactions. Organic bodies were complicated structures at the cellular level, and it was much easier to cause those structures to collapse than to dig through solid cement.

It still took longer than I would have liked (the inner tail muscles were thick, and the protective carapace ribbons were amazingly strong), but Nicole also flexed her tail in ways that made it easier for me to cut through, ignoring the pain. Another tug from the will-o-

wisp dropped her lower body, but the last few weakened threads of muscle and sinew tore instead of dragging her down, and I helped her brace against the sides of the tunnel so she didn't slip.

There was silence for a moment as the will-o-wisp gorged on its prize, but then a shudder went through the walls as the will-o-wisp then rammed the walls around the bottom of the exit. Chunks of stone fell at the bottom as it tried to get into the far-too-small tunnel.

"Nicole! Can you climb out?"

"..."

"Nicole?!"

"I-I think so."

Her voice sounded weak, but she managed to get her hands on the bent ladder and start pulling herself up, curling her tail around the ladder to brace and prevent back-sliding. I held on to the trailing end of her tail to support some of its weight.

It was slow going, made harder by the repeated shudders that announced the will-o-wisp's futile efforts, but Nicole eventually made it to the top. Imp appeared there, and helped pull her out onto the street. She slowly pulled her tail after herself, and once she was out, I climbed through the entrance myself. Up on the surface the will-o-wisps angered roars were muted. Even it couldn't get through several meters of solid cement.

Nicole's street was usually pretty empty, but even so I noticed a few people looking out from windows and talking into phones. We

needed to get going before cops or heroes finally showed. Nicole wasn't really looking up to running though. She stared blearily around herself, and seemed pale despite her dark-gray coloration. The severed end of her tail wasn't bleeding at least, so her regeneration was working properly it seemed.

"Nicole? How do you feel? We need to get moving."

"Tired… I forgot my armbands," she mumbled.

"No worries Tofu," assured Imp, "Getaway vehicle is already on its way."

True to his word, one of the black minion vans HH used rolled around the corner a minute later, not a moment too soon. I could hear the sirens a few streets over.

The van pulled up next to us, and the doors opened to reveal Spikes and Dillo, along with two unpowered minions I hadn't met before in the front seats. They helped me get Nicole into the van, and then we were all on the way to the base, the driver following speed limits to not draw attention. Imp stayed behind to distract the cops, he could just teleport away when he wanted to. I actually watched the police car drive past us, and all of the minions let out a sigh of relief. Nicole didn't really react, she seemed 'out-of-it', but at least she was alive. That was the important part.

All-in-all the mission was a success, which made me feel better about the massive expenditure of resources. I wasn't anywhere near critical, but I'd still burned through a week's worth of operation time, as well as mass which would need to be replaced. Also needed to reshift a few parts, cycle out a few chemicals, catalogue protein chains, and make a list of materials to go shopping for. At least I… **AH**!

In all the excitement… somehow… I *forgot* to take a sample of Nicole's tail.

Damn it…

I was adding one 'dead rat-stitcher' to the list.

Sidedish #5

Nicole

Nicole was quite dazed and confused after escaping the sewer system, but even then, she had to admit that getting into the back of a windowless van with a bunch of masked strangers was probably not her best move ever. Especially as they started plying her with candy, granola bars, and even a can of Nectar almost immediately. She was too out of it to explain that she wasn't mutating, but luckily Tofu was there to help her explain the details of what happened. Then there had been talk of dropping her off at a hospital, but there wasn't much a hospital could do at this point. The severed end of her tail had already healed over. When it was revealed that there also wasn't any home to drop her off at (seeing as she had just escaped said home), the minions collectively decided to bring her back to "the base" and decide what to do from there.

To say the car ride to said base was awkward was an understatement. Nicole hadn't been around this many people in years, and it wasn't helping how… 'unique' said characters were. The driver kept muttering under his breath about how he would someday kill everyone who didn't signal. Next to him, the man riding shotgun was loudly explaining his theory that the rat-zombie creatures were actually caused by aliens. *Demonic* aliens. Tofu had somehow cleaned up all the blood on himself with his power (most of it hers), and then proceeded to stare at the wall of the van silently, and the two other mutants wouldn't stop arguing with each other. Strangely their light-hearted bickering seemed the most normal, as the woman covered in spikes named… Spikes, kept trying to get her to eat candies, while the man with natural armor named Dillo kept telling Spikes to "stop fussing over the poor girl" before offering her granola which was healthier.

It all served to make her quite nervous, exacerbated by the fact she

already felt very off-balance, mentally *and* physically. With most of her eyes missing she felt blind, and she kept trying to clack claws that weren't *there* anymore. She didn't normally experience missing limb syndrome when she lost a body part, but this was a bit above her normal level of injury, and the sense of 'loss' made everything feel uneven.

She popped another candy into her mouth and chewed quickly, doing her best to just focus on the sugar and not her surroundings. The snacks were helping a bit to get her brain working again (getting fuel in yourself after an injury was mutant 101), but that also meant she was starting to think more clearly, which meant her thoughts were rapidly getting away from her like they normally did in stressful situations, and this *definitely* counted as one. She was in a van full of criminals!

...Who had saved her life. For some reason. Well, probably because Tofu asked them to. And Tofu was a criminal? A henchman of all things? She would have bet money he was a sidekick in training; he had been so worried about the rat-zombies attacking people. He had been so nice to her!...

Unless he was just pretending to be nice…

Nicole stomped down on that thought. Hard. It was ridiculous, just her own paranoia and she knew it. There was no reason for Tofu to pretend with her. Just her own insecurities rearing their ugly heads. Okay, so maybe Tofu hung out with the wrong crowd, but that didn't immediately mean he was out to get her, or trying to swindle her or something.

As if I had anything worth stealing.

…It would help if he wasn't just staring at the wall like a crazy person though. He was probably just thinking about something, but the mask/helmet made it impossible to tell. His costume had an interesting pattern that created a twisting overlap of light-gray/dark-gray, and she'd love to know how the suit did that thing where it split and re-sealed itself while he was fighting, but right now the generic faceplate and his stillness made it seem creepy. Like a puppet right before it moved in a horror movie.

She reached out a hand to tap his shoulder, "Um, Tofu?"

"Yes Nicole?" he answered immediately, turning his head to look at her. *Creepy doll!*

"**Eep**! I-I-I was just wondering what your were, um, thinking about, I guess?"

"Protein chains."

"…"

"…"

"…Protein chains?"

"Yes, specifically protein chains made using molymers that bypass polymer weaknesses using amino acid molecule flex."

"Oh… why are you thinking about that?"

"I'm trying to recreate several molecular structures from echo feedback analysis and filling in the blanks with predictive extrapolation."

"…and you're doing that in your head?"

"In my liver. Synthesizing untested proteins in the brain is inefficient."

"…**Pfft.**"

Nicole dissolved into giggles, the tensions of the last hour finally dissipating. Her world was turning upside down again, but at least there was one friendly constant this time. Maybe she didn't know everything about him, but Tofu was Tofu.

Nicole led a strange life. No one could deny that (least of all herself). Still, she had never in her wildest dreams thought it would lead to her sitting in the *actual* underground lair of an *actual* infamous super villain. Specifically, in the cafeteria of said lair. Wrapped in a blanket. Drinking hot cocoa. With a small pile of *military grade* energy bars that she was slowly working her way through.

She finished the one she was currently working on, washing it down with some cocoa. They tasted okay; slightly peanutty, with some kind of creamy, bitter chocolate glue to hold it all together. But then, even if it had tasted like shit, she would have been grateful. In the three years or so Nicole had lived down in the tunnels, she had been injured on numerous occasions, and recovering from the worst of them was always a miserable affair. Regenerating always left her ravenous, and trying to calmly hunt rats without the use of claws, or sometimes acid, was made infinitely harder when your stomach felt like it was trying to eat itself. In comparison to that, comfortably eating energy bars in a cafeteria was **heaven**.

She bit into her current snack, and her thoughts drifted towards her mutation.

The… incident… that originally caused her mutation had amputated her original legs high on her thighs, but the new muscles that replaced her legs went up even further, anchoring to her hip bones and spine. From there downwards, the rope-like muscles fused together, and created what she would have liked to think of as a mermaid's tail, but which to her eyes looked more like a giant skinned snake. At the very least, her tail was incredibly flexible, and she could bend it to sort of 'sit' in a chair, with the rest coiled and hidden under the table. At first glance, you might not even realize she was the most mutated person in the room. Between the gray girl huddled at a table, and the diverse mass of people that loitered around the room, it was the masked people that really drew the eye, and so she was experiencing something that hadn't happened to her in a *very* long time.

She wasn't the center of attention.

A few tables away, the man with the red mask who had come to her rescue was talking with a group of unique individuals, and that's where most of the attention in the room was focused. There was another scruffy-looking man who was obviously a tinker, judging from his plethora of tools, a well-dressed woman in a business suit, another lady with a slight mutation that had given her claws, and the man in the domino mask who had given her the energy bars (*Rattlesnake? No, Rattleback*).

After her rescue, it was Rattleback who had pulled out a field medic's kit and seen to her injury when she arrived at the base (although there wasn't much he could do for her). He seemed rather knowledgeable about mutant injuries though, first confirming it wasn't an active mutation, and then asking for an approximate weight at full health. She had been embarrassed to answer, but all Rattleback had done was raise an eyebrow, before pulling out a stack

of MREs for her to eat, and warning her not to let Tofu have any.

She opened another bar, and broke off a chunk which she passed to Tofu who was sitting beside her. You could practically taste the calories in these bars; if she had these to eat the entire time, she'd be able to regenerate most of her body in a few weeks, or maybe even less… *hooraaay~*. Nicole paused in eating her current bar to look at her "tail," and gave a little sigh. *If only it would stay gone.*

Tofu had amputated just above her last leg segment, leaving about fifteen feet of 'tail' for her to use. The severed end had already fused over, and was beginning to swell as her body geared up to regrow her more monstrous half. It didn't hurt anymore (now it *itched*), and she needed to find a place to stay before new legs started forming. Regrowing parts was never pretty, and she desperately wanted to be somewhere private before the first few limbs developed. The only question was: where to go?

She couldn't go back into the sewers with that army of zombies currently on the loose, and even if they weren't there it wouldn't be safe before she had at least a few pairs of legs regrown. If she had money, she could rent a storage unit to hide in while she regrew a few legs, if she had money. Maybe one of Tofu's coworkers could drive her to E15, and she could hideout in the slums? *That's way out of the way though. Ugh, I'll have to take the subway.* Just the thought of it made her stomach clench.

"Is that a cold iron?"

Nicole jumped as the sudden question brought her out of her thoughts. The person who had spoken was a four-armed mutant kid,

at the same table as her. He looked about twelve, and had overalls much like her own, with pockets crammed full of tools. A plate of food sat in front of him, which he had been disconsolately picking at. She had been curious as to why he was sitting in a super villain's lair, but had been too hesitant to ask. Probably the kid of someone who worked there.

"Um, this? Yes it is," she said, pulling the homemade cold iron from its pocket.

"I've never seen that model before."

"I made it myself."

"No way!" said the kid, eyes sparkling to life for the first time since Nicole had sat down at the table. "Only tinkers can do that!"

"W-well I mean, I didn't *make* make it. I had to buy the coil-rod, and I salvaged a bunch of the other tinker specific parts. Then I just kinda put them together."

"Now now, don't sell yerself short there," said a new voice, "Nobody makes their own coil-rod. Not worth the trouble." Nicole looked up, only to find that it was the scruffy-looking tinker who had spoken. He had wandered over to their table.

"Mind if I take a look?" asked the man, holding out a hand for the cold iron.

"Uh, s-sure," said Nicole, nervously handing it over to the cowl. Then she experienced a brief moment of panic as she realised she had just handed an ungrounded cold iron to someone who might resent the resulting shock.

"W-wait! D-d-don't turn it on though! It's ungrounded," she yelped. Then she panicked again when she realised she was telling a cowl what to do. Her worries proved unfounded when the man cheerily began looking over the cold iron without hesitation. He seemed to

intuitively know how to work all the extra dials Nicole had added, and then to her surprise turned it off and on a few times without zapping himself. His thick gloves just sort of 'caught' the small zaps of electricity that came off the cold iron. It was like *he* had built and worked with the tool for years.

Oh wait, duh, tinker.

"Not a bad piece," said the man, "How do you drain the feedback loop without a grounding battery?"

"Um, my skin is slightly more conductive than the rest of me, which spreads the charge out, and I regenerate, so I just let it, um… zap me."

"...HA! That's practical engineering right there. Should have figured Tofu's friends would be as crazy as he is. Put er there!" said the tinker, passing back her cold iron and holding his hand out. "Name's Socket. What d'you go by?"

"Ah, um, Nicole," she replied as she took back the tool, before getting pulled into an overly enthusiastic handshake.

"Nice ta meet'cha Nicole. Hey, if you have the time, you wouldn't happen to have recorded the arcing lengths when you use the iron would'ya? Could use some data on ungrounded-"

"Hey Socket?" said a new voice. The lady in the business suit had walked over. "Sorry to interrupt, but were you able to ask them about the rogue super?"

"Whoops! Almost slipped my mind. Wanted to ask you kids if you can give me any more information on our rat problem."

Socket pulled a rolled-up paper out of a back pocket, and unfurled it on the table. The laminated sheet was a map of E13, an incredibly large and detailed one that displayed the sector all the way down to individual blocks. Lightly colored markings had been added here and there to denote points of interest, including large red circles drawn around what must have been the zombie attack locations. The hospital, the mall, and a few other locations Nicole hadn't known about. Socket pulled out a red pen and added a mark to the map, a block labeled TT headquarters.

TT?... Oh. Tinker Tot.

Nicole glanced at the young kid across the table. He was staring at the fresh marking, looking like he might burst into tears at any moment. The lady in the business suit patted the boy's back, and Socket grumbled, "Nae worries lad, we'll find 'em."

Nicole felt the pit in her stomach drop further. The Tinker Tots were more of a *kid's club* than a gang. They got on people's nerves with their traps and pranks, but just the thought of those *things* attacking children…

She shuddered and put down her food. She was feeling a bit nauseous.

"Now," began Socket, "Here are the places that have been attacked so far. I've been trying to find a likely location for this arsehole's lair by mapping it out, but so far we've turned up diddly-squat. Any of you know of attacks I might've missed? Might help narrow it down a bit."

Nicole and Tofu leaned over the map. Judging by the markings there was indeed a pattern of sorts, besides just attacking large

concentrations of people. Most of the attacks were either on or relatively near Ashwood St, which bisected the sector neatly into a north and south. One circle was in the Red Zone on the westernmost end of the street, and another was just north of that at the hospital. Moving east along Ashwood, the next was at the mall five blocks south of Ashwood St, a bit east of the Red Zone. Then came her spot in the sewers, quite a few blocks east and south of the mall, and finally came the Tinker Tot base, about midway into the sector and over thirty blocks north of Ashwood St. Other than those spots were multiple small marks that Socket confirmed to be smaller incidents of home invasion or confirmed sightings.

Nicole added her home to the map, as well as a few small marks where she had found bodies in the sewer. Tofu unfortunately didn't know of any other sightings.

"Hmm, doesn't really narrow it down much," said Socket, "Ashwood is still in the middle of it all; at least it won't be too hard to do a sweep. I'll get some teams going to check where those tracers Imp planted cut out, maybe here, and here. I can probably call-"

"Um…" began Nicole hesitantly. Socket paused and made a gesture for her to continue her thought.

"It's unlikely the rats use the tunnels directly under Ashwood to move around. Most of the space is taken up by the subway, and the subway tunnels get checked frequently by Central. But, there's a gap under the subway here that I use to bypass it, and another here, and here, and the area near the Red Zone has a ton of tunnels you can use to get around the subway. A lot of the smaller instances happen in the south, this gap here in the markings is probably just due to Will-o-Wisps, and there are some easily accessed tunnels here and here that can handle a lot of traffic, so that offsets the most likely epicenter

to… here," and she pointed to a spot close to Ashwood St, about midway between Nicole's home and the mall.

"Hmm, two of my tracers went dead in that area," said Socket, "but it's unlikely to be there. The only place to hide under would be… ah shite."

"What's wrong? Is it no good?"

"No, I'm pretty sure you've got it right, but the location kinda throws a monkey wrench in the mix," said Socket, rubbing at his chin with a frown. But then he broke into a grin, "Ha, right good bit of detective work that was though. You a treasure hunter or something? Mapping the tunnels for old lairs?"

"Oh, um, a little bit? I do some salvaging, but also exploring, and a lot of hunting."

"Oh! Monster hunter are ya?"

"Well, no. I mean I *do* hunt stuff, but not professionally or anything, mostly just for food. I don't have a license to turn in bounties, and I can't really come to the... um, to the... surface, all that often..."

Nicole trailed off, realizing what she was saying. Socket's face was scrunched in confusion, but realization was quickly dawning in his expression, and on most of the faces around her. She could practically feel their gazes boring into her. She wanted to melt into the floor. First would come the disbelief, then the questions, then the looks of pi-

"I told you the tunnels were viable Sandra," said Tofu.

The lady with the business suit blinked. "What? No. No they are *not* Tofu!"

"But Nicole proves-"

"I'm not having this discussion with you again!"

The two started arguing, which thankfully took attention away from Nicole. Several of the nearby minions who had been eavedropping snorted or chuckled as Tofu tried to defend the merits of living in sewers, which made Nicole blush, and made Sandra's volume rise as she became more and more frustrated. No one seemed concerned though, so maybe this was a common occurence?

"Haha. Well, I'm not exactly sold on Tofu's argument on sewer living, but you've definitely got some guts girl," said Socket, turning away from the argument and speaking to Nicole, "Ever think about doing some part-time henching?"

Nicole's brain froze. Then jumpstarted.

“WHAT!? I-I-I can’t do that!”

“Sure you could! You’re smarter than most the knuckleheads tha’ come through here, and I can always use another pair of hands in the garage.”

“N-n-not that! I just couldn’t! That would be bad! Er, I mean, not that *you’re* bad. Of course I don’t mean to imply that vocation equals morality. Tofu works here and he’s nice, b-but of course you’ve all been nice to-me-too-and-I’m-really-grateful-but, I-I-I need-to-go-find-a-place-to-regenerate-and-and-and…” *Why is the room spinning?*

The people around her fell away, and it took Nicole a good two seconds to realize she was sliding backwards off the bench. Two hands shot out to steady her, one Socket’s, the other Tofu’s, and they managed to grab her shoulders before she fell.

“Whoa there lassie, don’t blow a gasket now.”

“Nicole are you alright?” asked Tofu.

“I-I t-think I-I-I…”

“Alright everyone, calm down now, give her some room,” said Sandra. “All this other stuff can wait for now, she’s had quite a day. Tofu, can you carry her down to the barracks? There should be some open single rooms she can use to get some sleep.”

“I-I can walk. Er, slither…” mumbled Nicole.

“It’s fine Nicole,” said Tofu. He stood and wrapped an arm behind her shoulders, and another under her tail, before suddenly lifting her easily from the bench. Most of her tail would drag, but Tofu walked towards the garage without a problem while supporting her.

Ack! How is he so strong!?

Nicole kept trying to protest that she could walk, while Tofu kept assuring her that it was fine. It might have *actually* been fine if there weren’t so many people around to see her getting carried around like a parade float, but she had to settle for just covering her face to hide her embarrassment.

Why are there so many people here? Aren’t evil villains supposed to work alone? Or in small evil groups at least? Is that a Parcel Corp Deluxe MkIII Fabricator? ***So cool!*** *Wait. No! Not cool! You aren’t allowed to own those! They probably stole it. Or bought it off a black market dealer. I can't be here! No one will believe I'm not with them! I'll get arrested! Or sent down to Panama! Oh my god when is Tofu going to put me-*

“We’re here Nicole,” said Tofu, interrupting her frantic thoughts. He had brought her through the garage to a large room filled with cots, couches, and various other furniture not meant for permanent living.

Several people were sitting in folding chairs around a table, apparently on break or something since they were playing a card game. They glanced over only briefly before going back to their game. There were several doors along the back wall with nameplates, but a few were apparently extra, and it was one of these Tofu approached. Inside was just a plain bed, with an empty wardrobe in the corner.

One of the card players wolf-whistled behind them.

“Omigosh Tofu, you can put me down now, I’ll be fine.”

“You displayed signs of ‘dizziness’, so it’s better to place you directly into the bed. Besides, Sandra said to carry you.”

Tofu did exactly as he said, and placed her gently onto the covers. Then she had to swat his hands away when he tried to help pile her tail in. She wasn’t *that* out of it, she could do it herself.

“Here’s the rest of your energy bars,” said Tofu, handing her the bars she hadn’t finished.

“Oh, thank you.” *When’d he grab those?*

“You’re welcome. Will it be enough to help you regenerate? There is more food in the cafeteria if it’s not.”

“I’ll be fine for now. I just…*__yawn__*…just need some sleep. I feel like I got hit by a train. Some sleep, food, and a few more weeks and… I’ll be back to my old self.”

“Good.”

“…”

"…"

Why is he just standing there? I really wish he'd take that mask off, it makes him look so creepy. Oh, duh. Evil villain base. Bad time to show your secret identity… but he's a shapeshifter right? Would you even need a mask? You could just change your face whenever you wanted. I wonder what he's thinking now. Why is he staring at the bed!? I wonder what he looks like right now, he seems the type to change his face even with the helmet on. He plays it safe all the time, always with the million backup plans in Gribblin Tamer… ugh, I need to make a plan too. I need to get out of here! I can't be roped any further into this! I can't believe they wanted me to join! I can't join an evil villain group!... But they can't be all bad if Tofu is doing it...and he saved me… and they're going after the frankenstein guy, so they can't be all bad... Why is this a queen sized bed!? UGH, I still can't think straight! I'll just get some sleep, and make a plan to leave in the morning. Socket and the rest of them seemed reasonable enough. I'll just tell them I can't join and that-

"I'm sorry for lying," said Tofu.

"...Bwah?"

"About my job. You didn't specifically ask if I was working as a henchman, but I am inclined to believe this falls under the category of a 'lie of omission'. It was necessary for my job, but I'm worried this has damaged our relationship. Please forgive me?"

"...Tofu you saved my life."

"Yes?"

"Like, you fought a literal zombie army to save me."

"I don't think that group qualified as an army."

"That's not- look, if it makes you feel better you're forgiven I guess? But seriously, you saved my life, um… thank you."

"You're welcome. I think you should accept the job offer."

…Bwah?

“I…think I need to think about it Tofu. I’m too tired to be making decisions right now.”

“Right, you need to rest. We can have Sandra interview you tomorrow,” said Tofu. “That works out actually, I can introduce you to my friends, and then we can all get lunch together.”

“What?! I, um, Tofu, I can’t- ”

“No worries, I’ll pay it. You already got me lunch today.”

“Huh?! Tofu, that’s not what-”

“See you tomorrow Nicole! Make sure to rest up and get better!” said Tofu, as he left the room and closed the door behind him.

“But Tofu!” *…aaaaand he’s gone. Great. Now what?*

Well, she knew what. She really did need sleep.

And this bed is so soft! It’s been forever since I used a real mattress!

She fluffed the pillow and settled in, planning to enjoy this silver lining. In the morning she’d deal with all those giant problems, but she wasn’t about to let them get between her and blessed, blessed sleep.

…

She was broke and homeless.

…

The largest super villain organisation in the sector wanted to recruit her.

…

Someone was making an army of hybrid zombie monsters.

…

Tofu was going to introduce her to his friends? To his *normal* friends? Just the thought of it-

OMIGOD BRAIN! SHUT. UP.

…

…

rustle rustle

…

Her tail itched.

Ch38 Chew

> "Fortress City qualifies as a mega-city. It was built to harbor the population of the entire western seaboard at maximum capacity.
>
> "It is nowhere near maximum capacity.
>
> "It's Odd Summer's fault of course. Plenty of terrible things occur to curb population growth. I'm not just talking about bad triggers or plain old-fashioned murderers either. One might be quick to blame supers for the body count, but the reality is that new supers are also the hardest hit demographic. One in three new supers don't live past their first **week**, let alone their first summer. Think about that if you happen to get 'lucky'."
>
> -Mr. K

Hellion's Henchmen

"It's the containment facility next to the highschool," said Socket.

"Are you serious? How the hell would they not have noticed that?" asked Viper.

"Haven't been any bad triggers at the school lately," answered Rattleback, "And the school's closed now anyway. Probably unmanned for the summer."

"You'd think they'd at least hire a security guard to sit his ass there."

"Those facilities all have automatic security systems," said Socket with a shrug. "Our rat musta found a hole in the security."

“Assuming he’s actually using it and not just under it,” said Rattleback. “If he’s inside then this could get a whole lot more complicated.”

“Imp is talking with Hellion right now," said Sandra, "he’ll let us know how she wants this handled."

The group collectively turned to watch Imp talking on his phone. They were still in the cafeteria, gathered around the table Tofu’s friend had been sitting at. The Tinker Tot had been sent to bed, and now it was only employees of HH in the cafeteria. Imp was a bit off to the side, pacing back and forth as he talked to their boss on the phone, and around the group of lieutenants was a gathering crowd of minions at the tables. No one had called the gathering together, most of them weren’t even on the clock, but everyone could tell that something was about to happen. Imp wasn’t saying much, and he was holding his phone farther and farther from his ear as the voice on the other end rose in volume.

Which meant they’d probably have orders soon.

The lieutenants quietly watched Imp pace for a minute longer. Then when his arm was almost fully extended away from his face, Hellion’s voice was interrupted by a large bang and crackle of static, and the call cut off.

Imp took a deep breath and sighed, then teleported his phone away, and turned to the table with his fellow lieutenants.

“Well. Hellion’s pissed.”

“No shit,” said Viper.

“I’ll order a new desk tomorrow,” added Rattleback.

Imp approached the group and leaned over the table, glancing at the map of likely locations. Then he addressed the group.

“Two things. First is the kidnap victims. They’ll of course be priority. Do we have any idea where they are?”

“They should be around here,” answered Socket, pointing at the likely hideout. “Tofu’s little friend helped narrow it down. Smack dab under a holding facility, or maybe even inside it.”

“Huh, kinda clever. C’s wouldn’t think to look there.”

“We could tip the heroes off ourselves, let them handle it,” suggested Sandra.

“No, not this time. This rat bastard has been targeting mutants, in Hellion’s territory, not a week after the city watched us wipe the Espada off the map. That needs to be answered, so we’ll be handling this ourselves. Whoever this person is they don’t get to walk away. Hellion’s orders.”

No one had any problems with that.

They began hashing out possible plans of approach. There were essentially three main details that needed to be accounted for: the hostages, the security system that might still be active, and the army of zombie horrors.

Sneak the hostages out? No, they didn’t have time to case the joint, and accidently being discovered partway through the operation

would result in a super brawl with civies in the mix.

Frontal assault? Not likely. They had enough boneheads to handle the zombies, but that big eel thing Imp had fought would be too much for them. Sandra wouldn't authorize it unless they had someone with the right powerset.

Bribe Turbo into pulling the hostages out while letting the villain 'disappear'? No, if he didn't go for it then they'd have alerted the heroes for no reason.

Let Hellion burn the zombie army down?

"Nope."

"Nuh-uh."

"Eff that."

The lieutenants immediately discarded *that* suggestion. Way too much potential for collateral damage. Hellion was usually pretty good about controlling herself, but this issue had hit just a bit too close to home for their boss, so she was currently barricaded in her office until her temper cooled enough to be safe. Hellion had a lot of strengths, but subtlety and precision weren't part of them.

Eventually they determined the plan with the highest chance of success would simply be to let Imp infiltrate and take the target out of the picture. The only potential downside was if the zombies didn't fall over once their creator bit the dust. They needed one more infiltrator to go in with him and cover the hostages, preferably someone who wouldn't risk tripping a sensor, and who could hold their own against the zombies until the boneheads arrived to even the odds.

Luckily, Imp knew just the minion.

The basement room was brightly lit. Extra lamps had been brought in and set up around the room to provide maximum visibility. Sturdy metal tables had also been dragged in to provide surfaces to work on, twelve total.

On each one was a corpse. Most of them mutant humans.

“Maybe add a few extra kidneys? Would that help the filtration?”

The voice came from a man sitting on a wheeled office chair next to one of the tables. A receding hairline, glasses, a striped button-up shirt and wrinkled slacks, not quite overweight, but definitely out of shape; the man was a picture of ordinary. In his hand was a book on biology, highschool level. He currently had it open to a page that detailed human organs.

The man turned away from the opened corpse in front of him and rolled his chair to the next table, where a fresh corpse with elongated arms and a scaled head waited. Then he had to wheel back briefly to grab the tool he forgot. The first incision went from stomach to sternum, cutting open the corpse with practiced movements (if somewhat imprecise). Then his phone rang, interrupting him. He sighed and wiped his hands on a towel before answering.

“Hey honey, what’s up?... Oh jeez it’s already so late, I didn’t notice... No no, nothing super important, just finishing up entering some final grades for the semester. The school closing early threw everything into chaos, you know how it is… Sure I can pick up milk on the way home, anything else while I’m at it?... Uh huh… sure… You made meatloaf? I’ll need to hurry this up then… Love you too, see you in, oh, an hour or so? Kiss kiss.”

The man hung up his phone, and quickly got back to cutting open the corpse, whistling as he did so. His good mood at learning about the meatloaf quickly faded though, quickly turning to frustration.

“Does this guy NOT have kidneys? What the hell. Goddamn mutants…” He grumbled as he searched for the elusive organs. Unfortunately he was interrupted again, this time by the sound of footsteps and scuffling.

There was only one door to the room, propped open with a stool, which allowed the approaching rat-hybrid to drag its catch into the room without fumbling with the latch. This particular specimen was mostly human-looking, except the head which had been borrowed from a rat, and hands which had been replaced with nessie tentacles. One of the resulting tentacle clusters was wrapped around the arm of a young human, about sixteen-seventeen, who had eyes with slit pupils, but was otherwise normal. The youth struggled to get himself free, but the rat-hybrid was stronger than it looked.

The rat-stitcher paused his work and sighed, “Like I’ve said over a dozen times now, don’t bring them to *me*, put them in the *cells*. I swear, even the eel is smarter than you damn rats.”

The creature began dragging away the boy, but not before he could

ask, “Who are you? Do you control these things? Why are you doing this?”

“And this is why I want them brought to the cells…” muttered the rat-stitcher. “It’s nothing personal kid.”

“So it’s a job? You’re killing people for money?” The boy asked. He seemed somewhat out of it, asking questions in a deadpan voice that belied his situation. Understandable, considering what he had likely been through before arriving in the rat-stitcher’s lair.

“...Wait,” commanded the rat-stitcher. The rat-creature stopped, and the rat-stitcher turned to the boy with an exasperated sigh. “No, I’m not doing this for money. I wouldn’t kill this many people over something so frivolous as money. When I said it’s not personal, I meant it’s not personal between me and *you*.”

“Who is it between then?”

“My, you’re just *full* of questions. If only all my students had been the same.”

“You’re a teacher?”

The rat-stitcher ignored that question, and sat quietly before asking, “Which parent was the mutant?”

“What?”

“Your eyes. I’m just guessing of course, maybe you mutated yourself? If it were both parents I’d think you’d have something a bit more... dramatic.”

“...My father.”

“Mhm.” The rat-stitcher turned back to the corpse he had been digging through, gesturing at it with his hand. “Did you know mutavus inflicted mutations always become the dominant trait? It changes your very DNA you know. If a trait doesn’t get passed down it’s only because the other parent gave a better one. Peh, as if a virus knows what’s ‘better’ for a person. Someday it might only be mutants. Can’t let that happen.”

“That’s what this is about?”

The rat-stitcher gave the kid a sideways glance before looking away, seeming lost in thought. Finally, he spoke.

“...My daughter, she was a senior in highschool at the time. Her boyfriend was a mutant…. they weren’t careful enough, she got pregnant, there was a... complication. I’d never thought about the subject much, not until then…”

The rat-stitcher continued staring into the middle distance and waved them away, the rat-hybrid quickly dragging the boy off to the cells. After another minute he snapped out of whatever trance had gripped him, and looked around the room, taking in the mess.

“Better clean this up, I’m going to be late as it is.”

He started cleaning up his tools, sometimes grumbling about the missing kidneys. When the work was almost done though, a ringtone interrupted yet again.

“**Now** what? The meatloaf’s going to get cold at this rate,” he said, reaching for his phone. But then he became confused when he saw the screen was still off, and the ringtone went off again, coming from somewhere else.

“Sorry, it’s my phone,” I replied.

The rat-stitcher jumped in fright, not expecting the ‘corpse’ I had disguised myself as to speak. I took advantage of his confusion to reach out and clamp a hand over his mouth, wrapping my elongated fingers around his head to keep a tight grip on him. He tried to scream and struggled, but couldn’t dislodge my makeshift gag. I waited, watching the door for any stitch-rat minions that might be coming.

Nothing came. It seemed the rat-hybrid creations really were controlled by verbal commands. That meant I had time.

I reached inside my crudely opened chest cavity, and withdrew my phone from the fleshy pocket it was hidden in. Seems Tim was giving me a call. I answered it.

“Hello Tim.”

“Hey Tofu. Hope I’m not calling too late.”

“You’re not. I’m actually at work anyways, I’ve got the late shift at the warehouse.”

“Oh, well I can call back tomorrow if you’re working.”

“It’s fine, I’ve got a moment. What’s up?”

“I was going to go part hunting at Cedric’s Hardware tomorrow and I wanted to know if you’d be interested in tagging along.”

“Hmm, I would, but I’m helping a friend of mine move into her new place tomorrow. I don’t know if I’ll have the time to -**oof**”

The rat-stitcher tried to pull himself free with a sudden burst of action, yanking so hard he pulled me halfway off the table. I anchored my feet to the floor, using traction claws to get a good grip. He wasn’t going anywhere.

“You alright?” asked Tim.

“Yeah, I just lost my grip on a box. Anyways I’m not sure if I’ll have time tomorrow, but we could do something Wednesday?”

“Oh, I won’t be in-sector Wednesday. My family and I are going up to NE7 to visit my aunt for a few days. She had a bad scare, and my mother wants us to keep her company.”

“I see. Well we can do something when you get back. Just give me a call.”

“Alright. Later then.”

I ended the call, and stuck my phone back in its ‘pocket’ under my ribcage. The rat-stitcher had done quite a number on the internal ‘organs’ I had formed specially to maintain my disguise. A skeleton, a circulatory system, musculature, and a nerve network were of course necessary, but the other organs could be much more freeform. Lungs to speed oxygen absorption, vocal cords, sensory organs, a stomach to store food in while I dismantled it, and however many hearts I needed to speed up micro-unit distribution. Oh, and a brain to run Human.exe. Those organs were important for daily use, but could be discarded as necessary. All the other organs, like liver and intestines, were superfluous, and I had formed them specifically to perfect my disguise.

And the rat-stitcher had dug through it with all the grace of a blunt shovel. Stitcher would be disappointed. I was too. It had taken a lot of effort to maintain the disguise while he was digging through it.

I reached out and pulled away the stool propping the door open. Then I looked over his tools and grabbed some of the better ones for myself (scalpels made wonderful shivs).

I turned my attention to the rat-stitcher. He was pale and had fallen to the floor, his hands wrapped around my wrist as he uselessly tried to pry me off.

“So. Tell me more about this… meatloaf.”

It took a little while to finish up with the rat-stitcher. I had a lot of questions, and when I got my answers I still needed to make a ‘message’ out of him as Imp put it. Hopefully I did it right.

The rat-stitcher had made several mistakes in how he operated. First was pissing off Hellion, that was obvious. Then came how sloppily he executed his plan. He should have ‘laid low’ for longer, and built up a larger force in secret, taking advantage of the organisms in the sewers. If he hadn’t hit such attention grabbing targets, he could have built up a real army (not that it helped him in the end. Not a single guard while he worked? Seriously?). The only good thing he did was targeting already mutated people, which meant he didn’t have to work around potential trigger events or mutations.

One detail he might have considered though, is that if you nullify their power, an already triggered human works just as well as a mutant for experimentation. Performing my own experiment, I was able to observe exactly how much brain matter a human needs to stay alive. This matched up with how much was required to run Human.exe at a minimum, so it was nice to know that Human.exe wasn't just being finicky with me whenever I tried to reduce dedicated processing power.

I sent a message to Imp that the rat-stitcher was dead, and then left the room, not bothering to switch back to my regular disguise just yet (though I did put my mask on).

The plan to get inside the rat-stitcher's lair had been simple enough. I disguised myself as a mutant corpse, used a decoy scent near the lair to get the rats' attention, and then let them bring me in themselves. Imp followed the safe route using markers I dropped along the path, and then we were both inside. Whichever one of us found the rat-stitcher first would kill him, and the other would find the hostages and wait for the stitch-rats to fall over.

Normally I wouldn't have volunteered for such a dangerous role in the plan, but the rat-stitcher's powers were a known quantity, and I had been supplied with tools for safety. A heavy-duty location tracker, a tazer, a bundle of volatile material that would explode under the right conditions (legally *not* a grenade), several military grade energy bars, and an extra cell phone that had its signal boosted. By using the cell phone's camera to broadcast footage to Imp, he'd be able to teleport right to my location in an emergency (and I noted the fact that he needed knowledge of his destination to teleport). None of which had come into play of course; the rat-stitcher hadn't been up to defending against a real attacker. Disappointing in almost all aspects.

I will admit that I was surprised he resisted my questioning. He'd answered most of my queries, but when I asked why humans like rectangles so much, he refused to give me a solid answer. Oh well, I'd figure it out eventually. Questioning the rat-stitcher wasn't why I accepted this job anyways.

I made my way down the hallway, keeping an eye out for any rogue rat-hybrids. The first one I came across was reassuringly dead, as was the second, but the third one was still twitching. It had been randomly dragging itself back and forth along the hall leaving a trail of blood, and then collapsed against the wall. This one was less modified than the previous two, with a rat as its base component, so I suppose there had been enough unmodified systems for it to live past the rat-stitcher's power disappearing. I killed it quickly and moved on.

I made my way down the halls of the containment facility, following the directions the rat-stitcher had given me. The cells that were being used to hold the hostages were actually in the opposite direction, but they weren't my real goal. No, my main goal was the 'storage' room, which was more of a cave the rats had carved out under the facility. Apparently the rats had infested the building long before the rat-stitcher had triggered, and once he did, his creations had led him to the perfect lair. A shame he wasted the opportunity.

Speaking of opportunity…

> Analysis results: blood 100%, muscle 77%, carapace 35%.

The data I recovered from my brief interaction with Nicole's cell structures was informative, but frustratingly incomplete. I was

already using the blood modifications (hers had a much better oxygen transfer rate), but if I tried to apply the muscle improvements I'd wind up pulling my own skeleton apart. This was why I preferred complete samples; ligament attachment points, blood flow capacity, cellular regeneration patterns, wear-and-tear rates from repeated motions, and thousands of other small details were all needed to make a working biological system. You couldn't just slap things together, especially not when some of the parts had such a higher performance output.

I kicked a rat-hybrid corpse out of a doorway. It had fallen apart at the seams when the threads keeping its large legs attached had snapped, unable to handle the pull of the powerful muscles without the rat-stitcher's power to help. Case in point.

The hallway eventually gave way to a rough-hewn tunnel, teeth marks making it obvious how the tunnel was constructed. A short jaunt down said lightless tunnel, and I emerged into a semi-constructed cavern. It had originally been part of the sewer, so there was evidence of human construction, but most of it was recently carved from the cement foundations of the city. Dead bodies were everywhere, both creations and civilians, kept only semi-fresh by the icy air gushing from a busted pipe in the ceiling.

Laying in the center of it all was the giant will-o-wisp. Not dead. Scarfing down corpse after corpse (many of which fell back out of the holes Imp had blasted in its side).

Annoying. Impressive, but annoying. One of the heads that had been attached to it was ripped off, and it was moving sluggishly in the extreme, but most of the arms sewn around its mouth to act as teeth were still there, and it was eating everything it could grab. I didn't see what I came for among the bodies it hadn't eaten, but I did see a

large bulge in its gut, bloating a large section midway down its length. Seems I'd have to work for my prize.

I watched the will-o-wisp for a while, analyzing its movements, and noting the state of the corpses that fell out of it, before throwing a decoy scent-bulb at one of the corpses near its head. It instantly reacted and ate that corpse, but I didn't see anywhere near the amount of power or speed it displayed when it last attacked. It was dying, but slowly. Too slowly for my purposes. I needed to get back to Imp and the other minions eventually.

I considered using the explosive package that Rattleback gave me, but ultimately decided against it. The will-o-wisp already had two holes blown into it, and I didn't think a third would do much more than put it on its guard. Plus, I would rather not damage any important samples.

I watched the will-o-wisp for another minute, throwing out a few scent-bulbs on nearby corpses to see how it reacted and moved. Once I was satisfied I had a near-complete comprehension of its abilities, I approached and lay down near its head, releasing decoy scent as I did so.

It swallowed me up immediately.

Substandard intelligence.

As soon as I was in its throat I extended traction claws. It screamed and tried to dislodge me, thrashing against the walls of the room when it couldn't simply spit me out, but it didn't have the ability to

crush me inside its own throat, and my tendrils were extending into it and anchoring me further. After that I treated it like a harvesting procedure, dumping micro units to dissolve tough tissue structures and absorb materials to build even more micro units. Soon enough the organic structures that had held its neck together were sufficiently dissolved, and its large head simply fell off.

To its credit, the head didn't die immediately, the arm-teeth attached to its mouth twitching as they tried to find purchase on anything around it. I was definitely looking forward to analyzing the inner workings of its head (once it was truly dead of course).

"Well, *that* was disturbing."

I froze, then looked at the entrance to the cave, where Imp was standing. The eyes of his mask gleamed in the dark cave as his helmet compensated for the darkness. He must have arrived while I was inside the will-o-wisp. I withdrew myself from the stump of the will-o-wisp's neck, and pulled myself back into the shape of my regular disguise.

"Hello Imp. Did everything go okay with the hostages?"

"Went just peachy, all the zombies fell right over. Boneheads have it handled, so I decided to see what trouble you were getting into this time."

"I haven't had any trouble so far."

"Right, no trouble he says…" said Imp, his head turning as he scanned the cave. "I have to say Tofu, I'm impressed with how well you've taken to the job. Especially some of the more unpleasant aspects. Most teens wouldn't have the stomach for wet work."

“Wet work?”

He pointed down at the will-o-wisp, where a large pool of blood had formed between the severed pieces, soaking into the surrounding bodies.

Ah, ‘wet work’.

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard the term,” continued Imp, “You seem quite experienced at it. Makes me wonder what your story is. Where did you say you were from again?”

“I’ve never mentioned where I’m from.”

“That’s right. That’s right you haven’t. Mind telling me your story? I’m mighty curious.”

Something was off. Imp didn’t normally talk like this, and… his hand was casually resting on the butt of his pistol. To anyone else his stance might have seemed relaxed, but someone who could teleport his weapons into his hands wouldn’t develop that kind of posture, nor did it match his normally slouched pose. He was doing it on purpose… it was a warning.

“I’d rather not talk about myself Imp.”

“You sure? Cause after what I’ve seen today I’m thinking I’d like some context. You do realize it’s not normal for a teenager to be completely fine with… ***this***,” he gestured at the body pantry around us. “Your friend Nicole’s reaction was much more believable, and from what I can tell she’s seen some shit. Add that to the fact I’ve seen you ripped in half without flinching, and stabbed by a power

that knocked freaking Pebbles out, and maybe you can understand why I'm a bit *concerned* about who I hired."

"...I thought HH policy was that employees need not reveal personal details?"

"I'm not asking for your social security number here. I'm asking to be convinced that you aren't some plant. Or a mercenary. Or a vigilante."

"I'm not any of those things Imp."

"Yes well, considering you're a shapeshifter, I could stand here all day guessing and never narrow it down. I'm not asking who you aren't, I'm asking who you *are*."

I didn't really know how to answer that. But…

Use of word **who**, not **what**.

He still thought I was human. My disguise wasn't compromised just yet. But I wasn't sure what I could tell him without revealing myself.

"Tell you what," he said, "Since you don't want to tell me one of your stories, I'll tell you one of mine. Nearly twenty years ago... damn, makes me feel old to say it that way. Anyways, twenty years ago, I was running with some shit gang here in E13. More just a group of people that did their crime together really. We'd scrape together the barest living like rats, eventually get broken up or absorbed by another gang, and the cycle would repeat. E13 was a pretty shit place back then. I hated it. I wanted out.

"Then one particular Odd Summer comes along. I trigger. Holy shit do I trigger. Do you have any idea how easy it is to steal things when

no one can stop you leaving? Suddenly my life was easy street. I could take whatever I wanted and just, bounce. Started living with actual capital in my bank, started dealing in higher stakes robberies, but to be honest I was still stuck. Still going through the same daily scraping cycle.

“Then I get an offer from some high rollers. One of the big time gangs from out of the sector moving in, with even bigger plans. They were gonna use their connections to change a few laws in E13, set it up for what would eventually become the Red Zone. All they wanted was some powered muscle, so they’d been snapping up all the new talents from that summer. That’s when I met Hellion.

“Things were great at first. The high rollers pointed and we jumped, then we got paid, then we got all the things we thought we wanted. Money, power, recognition, or at least what felt like recognition. Hell, all us young folk even felt like a team, for what it was worth. I was satisfied, but I hadn’t realized yet that I was still in that fucking cycle. I was still just a rat, even if I was a well fed one. When things began to sour I didn’t recognize it. Hellion did. The people that set up the Red Zone weren't interested in building up E13 you see. All the wealth it generated left the sector, used to fund their escapades in other areas of the city. The people who were useful to the gang ate a bit better, but those on the bottom were in worse straits than ever before, what passed for E13’s government basically being part of the gang. If it weren’t for the heroes that stuck it out at the time, the sector might have been truly fucked...

“So, Hellion gathered some like-minded individuals who also didn’t like the way things were heading, performed a coup, formed Hellion’s Henchmen, and we all lived happily ever after. The End.”

...What?

“Imp, I believe there is more to your story than that.”

“Heh, annoying isn’t it? Not knowing the full story?” He tilted his

head towards me. I couldn't see his expression, but I got it.

"Anyways," continued Imp, "The point of this story is that it took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get E13 and Hellion's Henchmen into the shape they're in today, and if you think I'd let 'company policy' stop me from defending what we've built here, you're more naive than I thought possible. So. I told you my story, now it's your turn. I insist," he shrugged, "Or you're fired."

That was a relief. I had been worried he would try to kill me. My bullet-resistant suit was currently folded around my core, but teleportation made fighting him unpredictable. He used guns, but there was nothing stopping him from just teleporting a live grenade into my face. I would have had to run and hope he didn't follow me deep into the sewers. It was nice to know I had the option of walking away instead of revealing myself, although it would mean leaving behind what I'd built here. An unpleasant outcome. I also liked what I'd built.

I looked around the room and pointed at one of the less-modified hybrid bodies, "I used to call rats grey-furs, before I knew their name." I turned back to Imp. "I fought them almost daily, along with yellow-furs and brown-furs. It was part of combat testing. If I succeeded, I got to eat what I killed. Otherwise I received only nutrient slurry. There was also puzzle and survival testing. All testing occurred in a thirty-by-thirty foot concrete room, adjacent to the room I slept in. Up until I escaped these were the only two rooms I had ever been inside as far as I remember.

"Then when a yellow-fur triggered at the start of Odd Summer, I was able to use the event to escape. In the city I met Jasper, went to E13, and signed up with Hellion's Henchmen. The End."

Imp was silent, just staring at me. Then he tilted his head, "Well

Sandra? Does his story check out?"

I heard a note of static, before Sandra's voice came in over our helmets, "...Every word. Damn it Imp, I work in HR to prevent this kind of thing! I do **NOT** appreciate being used to dig through someone's persona-" ***Click***

The sound cut out as Imp turned off the channel.

"Ugh, I'm gonna pay for that one later. Sorry about the third degree Tofu. I had to be sure."

"I understand. So I'm not fired?"

"Nah you're fine. And I know it might not mean much coming from me, but I'll be discreet about your background. It's your story to tell."

I shrugged. If he and Sandra accepted my backstory, then there wasn't much cause for concern if others learned it.

"Alright," said Imp, "I'm gonna go snoop around and see if I can find anything useful. Catch up with the other minions when you're done with the eel thing I guess." He gave a brief wave and teleported away, leaving me alone in the corpse pantry.

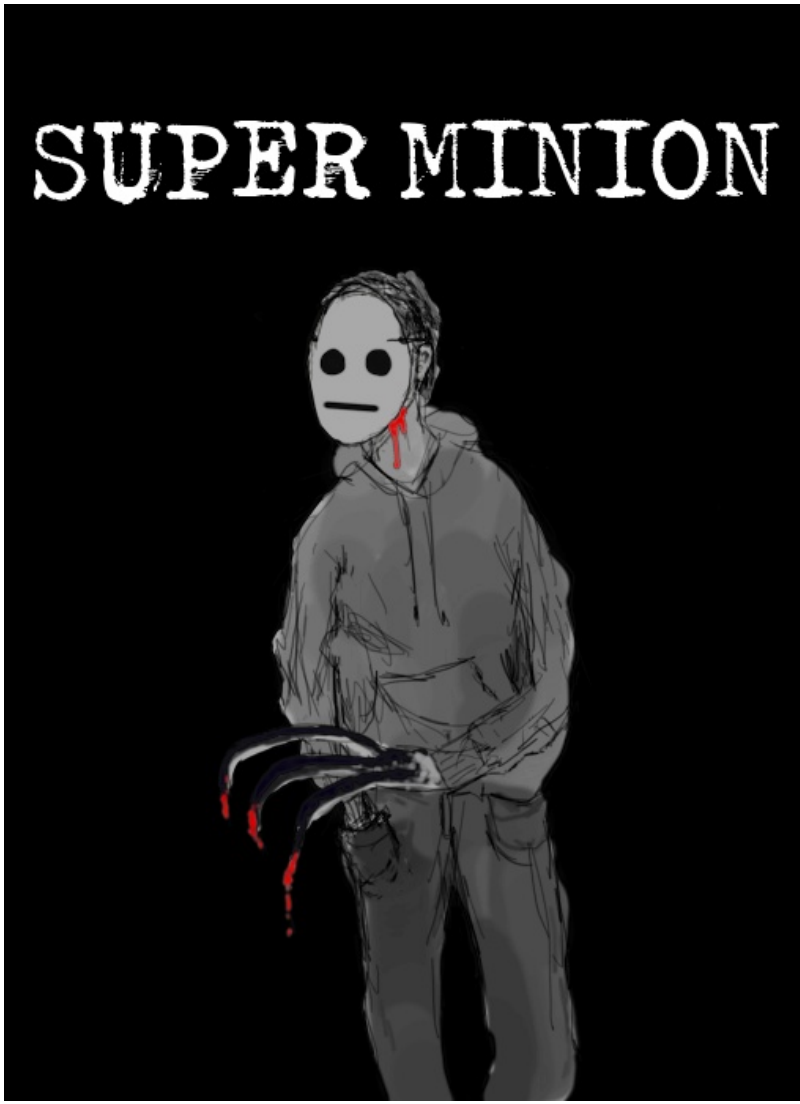
I took a moment to assess my situation before getting back to what I was doing. This was the closest I had come to disaster in a while, although this was the first time a simple question could have been my undoing. I couldn't beat Imp in a fight, and I was sure now that Sandra had some way of detecting lies. One wrong word and it could have all been over...

Sometimes humans are just terrifying.

A note from Gogglesbear

And some wonderful artwork of Tofu by Sage Thrasher I forgot to add yesterday because I was tired (my bad!).

Spoiler: Spoiler



Someone get Tofu some napkins. There's ketchup everywhere.

Ch39 Beefy Boy

Phwip ***Crack*** My kick whipped into the practice target, creating a satisfying sound as hairline cracks extended from the impact point.

After completing the rat-sticher job, I had chosen to forgo sleep, and instead practice my combat movements using the new designs I learned. This of course involved testing Adder's martial arts training against various targets. I'd throw kicks and punches, again and again, each time making small adjustments to the muscle movements, trying to find the most effective balance between force, stability, and recoil damage. It made for noisy practice, but the shooting range at the HH base was both empty and private, with plenty of disposable targets, which made it a perfect place to try out my new designs.

And oh, what wonderful designs they were.

The will-o-wisp turned out to be a better prize than I expected. Despite the large amount of damage to the corpse, I was able to get some decent samples from it, the best of which was its brain, or should I say *brains*. Rather than a singular brain, it had what amounted to a bundle of nerve clusters, each cluster able to act as a stand-alone brain by itself. None of these nerve clusters were very complex of course, but the will-o-wisp had already received massive brain damage before our encounter, and yet had still managed to keep going. Effectively a case of quantity over quality, allowing it to lose large amounts of brain matter without dying. It made me wonder how the rat-stitcher's minions had ever defeated the organism in the first place. Perhaps they just got lucky.

Regardless, the will-o-wisp brain design gave an insightful look at how to run multiple brains concurrently. Technically a human brain did a limited version of this (the left and right hemispheres could somewhat compensate for the loss of the other), but the will-o-wisp brain design did this as a matter of course, and that insight allowed me to *almost* run multiple copies of Human.exe perfectly in sequence. I was just a single step short. A step which Nicole's cast-off 'tail' *propelled* me over.

Where to even begin? Once I had dissected the will-o-wisp, I was able to recover the other half of Nicole which I previously amputated. In remarkably good condition too. Apparently the rat-stitcher had retooled the will-o-wisp to transport corpses rather than digest them, a most welcome windfall. Of all the designs I had acquired over the last twenty-four hours, Nicole's was leaps and bounds above the rest. So much so that it wasn't worth absorbing the other corpses in the 'pantry' in the limited time I had. I didn't want people wondering where the bodies went anyways.

The first amazing thing was Nicole's eyes. She had eight of them on her second head, and each pair worked slightly differently. The forward eyes worked the most like a human's, just slightly adjusted for low-light conditions. Then came the eyes with no pupils, which apparently sensed heat signatures. Useful for hunting in the dark.

The third pair with the crosshair pupils had me stumped for a while. They had the benefit of being pseudo-binocular vision with a single pupil, but displayed a strange purplish chromatic effect with varying intensity onto my vision depending on what I was looking at. I only figured out what it was when I glanced at a lightbulb and the area around the filament was practically highlighted in purple. Testing it on a few more objects, I determined the eye was identifying electrical currents or fields, or maybe both, I didn't have enough context for what I was seeing. Either way, its purpose seemed to be to identify dangerous amounts of electrical output, as the electrical impulses in

my own body didn't register. Quite the useful adaptation, electricity was one of my worst weaknesses, and the ability to identify live currents at a glance was nice.

The final set of compound eyes were uncomplicated, meant for wide-angle viewing and detection of incoming threats. I had already developed this modification on my own, and in fact most of Nicole's eyes were obvious advancements of basic eye design, but the real improvement was how they worked in concert. I'd found vision to be the most difficult sense to work with, as information overload became a real problem once you reached a certain mix of quantity/quality, and trying to decipher, calculate, and act on the received information in the midst of combat could be overwhelming. Nicole was somehow processing the information from ten eyes total, across four different types of vision, and doing so fast enough to have near Adder-level response times in combat.

As it turned out, the answer was a second, specialized brain. Located in her second head and attached to the eye system. This brain was wired specifically to handle the different sight inputs, not just by compiling the information, but also by having pre-programmed reflexive responses based on what I assumed to be Nicole's mental state (I had to assume since I was of course missing Nicole's human half). Basically this 'slaved brain' would download a copy of Nicole's mind, determine her priorities (was she hungry, what did she consider a dangerous threat, what would she do in x situation etc), and would then begin reacting to incoming stimuli before her core brain was even aware something was happening. As its decisions would always line up with the main brain, to Nicole it likely felt as if she just had preternatural reflexes. From this information sharing system between her two brains, I was able to work out a proper hierarchy protocol, with the result being that I could now run multiple human brains all running Human.exe at the same time without my micro units becoming confused!

...Which wasn't all that useful unless I could make biological units separate from my core. I tested it by making a separate brain, and then designating it as the ‘lead’ brain before separating it from my body and core.

It dissolved after three seconds… a new record! Normally having such a large chunk of micro unit saturated flesh disconnect would start the self-destruct process immediately. Having the brain marked as lead brain and running Human.exe on it must have tricked the micro-units into thinking it was still receiving the core signal somehow. Likely some facet of Human.exe that tampered with micro unit functionality to even allow a secondary processing center in the first place. I really wish I could read Human.exe’s base code… Oh well, the eye functionality had made this whole endeavor worthwhile by itself, and yet it was the least of the advancements I’d obtained tonight.

I threw another punch into my practice target with a ***crack***, and then analyzed the damage I had done to my hand and the target. Not too bad.

Deconstructing Nicole’s corpse had given me two major modifications: flexible chitin and foldable muscle. The chitin turned out to be a combination of cartilage, modified bone marrow, regular chitin, and a type of chemical layering that was reminiscent of the suit Socket had made for me (if not *quite* as bullet resistant). It was stronger than bone, but far more flexible, and light enough that the increased weight was negligible. Especially since the foldable muscle was easily capable of applying twice as much force per square inch as what I’d developed on my own. These two modifications were so much more advanced than what I’d been using that I’d decided to do a complete overhaul of my body.

My fist hit the target dummy again with a *__thwack__*, and the muscles around my 'elbow' ruptured, the one-thousand thirty-four punches finally wearing out the stretchable pseudo joint I was using to extend my arms.

There were some…. slight bugs to work out with applying these modifications to a human frame, but I was getting the hang of it. Technically the chitin was meant to be used as an exoskeleton, with the foldable muscle supplying the pressure force from inside. I was doing the exact opposite, using the chitin as my skeleton with the muscle on the outside, and there were some minor glitches to work out as a result. I had briefly considered just changing my normal disguise to accommodate the new materials, but in the end decided against changing what I looked like. Humans were very sensitive to appearance, and I'd rather not make them uncomfortable by switching to a combat model for my disguise. Especially now that some of my acquaintances knew my 'backstory'. Best not to make any major changes when I was already under scrutiny.

All things said and done, I would be able to maintain my normal disguise of an eighteen year old male youth. While I weighed three-hundred and ninety-four pounds, a combination of baggy clothes and storage compression would keep me looking as average as possible; not too tall, short, fat, skinny, ugly, or handsome. Skin, hair, and eye color would be kept at the average aggregate I developed back when I first formed my disguise, partly for visual consistency around acquaintances that did not know about my shapeshifting capabilities, but also because it made it easy to quickly match the average human crowd palette, allowing me to blend in.

My prefered combat form had changed only in the underlying mechanics. I no longer needed a piston-bone structure to lengthen my limbs (*so* inefficient), and instead could simply detach joints while stretching the connecting muscles. Nicole's foldable muscle and flexible chitin-bone made this both possible and preferable to my old

system. My entire skeleton was now flexible chitin-bone, giving me unprecedented flexibility even without shifting, and I was even able to get rid of the popping noises that distressed Nicole when I reversed my knees. Socket's suit had no difficulty accommodating my improved range of movement, and I was able to reduce the size and mechanical complexity of the slug slingshot in my mouth to the point I would no longer have difficulty speaking while using it. Traction claws were of course still present in all four limbs.

Incorporating Nicole's acid though… required more testing. Apparently the acid Nicole used was just modified stomach acid, and not a volatile mixture of two prepared chemicals like I had hoped. Instead it had to be produced continuously and in large quantities, as it quickly degraded into inert sludge that had to be reabsorbed. That made storage rather risky, as a breach could prove disastrous. Nicole could get away with it because of her large size, natural armor, and her core being far from her stomach, but with my smaller body it was too risky to have such a corrosive material around my core. I'd put finding an implementation method on my list of things to do.

Now I just needed to figure out the best spots to add extra eyes. The improvements from Nicole's brain meant I could use permanent eyes instead of the low-quality temporary ones I'd used for wide-area detection until now. Definitely at least one on the back of my head where it was inconspicuous. I'd need to ask Socket if he could add extra eye slots to my mask.

And finally, one of the absolute *best* changes about my design:

Energy reserves = 2.3 months continuous operation.

A few short weeks ago I was still measuring my remaining lifespan in

hours. Making energy acquisition decisions on a minute by minute basis. Now I had enough resources to afford wasting them on testing disposable ammo designs, and calculating Gribblin Tamer level generation algorithms. I could never have imagined how far I would advance back in those days in the test chamber. Literally.

I kept testing muscle movements into the early hours of the morning, slowly working out any flaws, and trying to get everything in order to test my new design against Adder when she started morning training. Then I'd need to go to the grocery store near my apartment to buy meatloaf ingredients, and see if Mikey and Cindy were available for lunch. I was hoping to convince Nicole that signing up with Hellion's Henchmen was the best option for her, and hopefully meeting potential allies would do the trick. That or food. Even with how strong she was, it would benefit her survival to integrate with a strong faction like HH. I'd just have to be cautious about Nicole's reluctance to be around other people. If there was one thing I'd learned during my time in Fortress City, no matter how strong you were, strength in numbers could not be ignored.

Thwack* *Crack* *CRUNCH

My punches shattered a chunk off of the cement block I was using as a practice dummy. It had started as a cement cube, six feet across per side, but now half of it was crumbling rubble. The result of several hours chipping away at it.

Hmm… even with my enhancements, strength of numbers couldn't be ignored. But power was power, and I had grown quite a bit since those early days in E13. How might my punches fair against, say, Magenta's forcefield now?

More testing required.

Viper

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP

Lily was startled out of a deep sleep, momentarily unable to remember where she was, but that didn't stop her from reflexively grabbing her phone with one clawed hand. She brought it up to her bleary eyes, and tried to make out what was going on. For the past three days, she'd had her phone set to ring if any specific keywords showed up in E13 news feeds or message services. The news channel playing now showed an overzealous reporter speaking to the camera as police directed civilians in the background, Brick and Magenta both visible among the crowd. The reporter was relaying the "miraculous" rescue of the people kidnapped by the "rat swarms," and of course getting about half the details wrong. For one thing, the real rescue had happened hours ago, and the heroes hadn't exactly been a part of it.

Lily continued watching (just to get Central's version), scoffing here and there at how badly the reporter mangled the order of events. He claimed the hostages had been "rescued" early that morning when heroes found the "hidden lair" they were being kept in. Of course, the reality of the situation was that they had been rescued *hours* ago when Imp and Tofu infiltrated the Central holding facility. HH minions had then provided cursory medical attention, organized an evacuation of the hostages, and phoned in an anonymous tip after stripping the Central facility of everything that wasn't nailed down and ditching the scene. HH wouldn't get any official credit for the

rescue, but honestly that was for the best. Good news could be hard to come by during Odd Summer, and the population needed to be reassured whenever possible, even if that meant the heroes got some undue credit.

Still, a few details irked Lily enough that she resolved to post some scathing comments on their website. For one thing, they were claiming that the abductions were perpetrated by a swarm of mutant rats, and not by a person with powers. That wasn't the bad part, heck, it made sense to do. The story wouldn't hold out under scrutiny, but the majority of people who just glanced at the news would buy it until the next story came along. No one wanted to remind the populace at large that one asshole with a lucky power could create uncontrollable amounts of devastation and death, especially not when that asshole's M.O. had been so reminiscent of cowls like Lesion or Bloody Piper.

But did the reporter *have* to put such an emphasis on it being a *mutant* swarm of rats? Asshole. Conveniently glossing over the fact that all the victims were mutants as well.

Lily's claws made a staccato of clicks and clacks against the reinforced screen of her phone as she pounded out several posts on the website. One well-worded long post about the issue and why it was an issue, several alt accounts agreeing with and upvoting it, and one unrelated account to make a separate post insulting the reporter's receding hairline. Then to really grind it in she posted links for *#puristreporterahole* to whichever micropost websites she had open.

Annnnnddd, done. Fuck this guy in particular.

With a satisfied grunt, Lily checked the time and groaned. It was six

in the morning, well before her usual rise and shine time. She'd forgotten to remove the alarm last night.

She briefly considered going back to sleep, but decided against it. Sandra would need help with the after-action reports and hazard pay bonuses for the hostage rescue. Plus, the stack of files on potential hires had been growing rather large, Odd Summer was a busy hiring season. If Lily slept in, Sandra would likely try to finish it all before Lily even got into the office, and then brush off the extra work with her usual chipper attitude.

Lily groaned as she sat up and swung her legs off the lumpy couch she had claimed. She hadn't made it home last night, instead falling asleep on a couch in one of the rec rooms. One thing you learned in the villainy business: stock your lair with places to crash.

*Even if they **are** lumpy as hell. Ugh, and I slept with my mask on.*

She rubbed around the edges of the black domino mask she was wearing. She was tempted to ditch it, but there were too many new faces around due to the aforementioned hiring, and despite all their precautions you never really knew. Stupid really, the mask wouldn't do shit to disguise her identity from a mole, but the law was the law, set in stone by the maker of Fortress City at its founding. If they caught you in an act of villainy without your mask on you could kiss your civilian life goodbye. *Sandra* of course got to dispense with a mask entirely, oh she of the legal loopholes.

Lily made her way to the elevators, glaring at any of the early risers that tried to talk to her about yesterday before she'd had coffee. Once she had a large cup from the cafeteria, she headed topside, being careful to dodge the line-of-sight of Adder and Tofu who she spotted

heading for the training rooms. There was always that risk that Adder would drag her into an *early morning* training session.

Lily shuddered. *Never. Again.*

She took an elevator up to the fake jacket store next to the office and walked the short distance between the buildings, grumbling at how bright it already was (the real summer of course overlapping the Odd one). She pushed the door open, and spotted the first good thing about the day: Gregor was waiting at her reception desk.

Well hel~lo Mr. tall, dark, and handsome.

Well, more like tall, dark green, and was probably rather handsome under the scales. Either way, he was polite, respectful, and didn't oogle too much, which all counted for a lot in Lily's book. It wasn't like she of all people was going to complain about scales.

Plus, knife-proof. Hel-lo.

"Good morning Gregory. Can I help you with something?" asked Lily, in a voice Tofu likely wouldn't recognize.

"Good morning," replied Gregory, turning to face her. "Thank you, but Sandra is already helping me. There was a problem with Central and my… my, um, bank account."

Lily gave him an understanding smile. "I've had that problem before. They tried to freeze my assets dozens of times before they finally gave up. No worries, we'll have that all cleared up and the C's will

eventually get the message. Let me know if there's anything you need until then okay?"

"Oh, uh, thank you… er, just so you know, you've got some... lines? Around your eyes?" said Gregory. His hand traced the area around his own eyes to show where he meant.

Lily's brow furrowed in confusion as she pulled out her phone and turned on the front camera. The problem was immediately visible; sleeping in her mask had left a glaringly obvious imprint around her eyes, and her makeup from the day before had smeared hideously within that imprint. She looked like one of those grungy trash-panda memes that were being used to mock villains on the message boards lately.

She turned off her phone and smiled awkwardly at Gregory, "Aheh, I'd better go fix this before the C's see me. Wouldn't want to make more work for Sandra. You, uh, have a good day."

"You as well."

Lily fled to Sandra's office, closing the door behind her. She put her back to the door and let out a large sigh, suddenly very glad she hadn't tried to go with a direct approach. Way more coffee was required before flirting was on the table.

Lily took another sip, hoping the caffeine would kick in soon, and briefly wishing she was a morning person before banishing that thought to the hells where it belonged. Sandra was of course already hard at work behind her desk, shuffling through a stack of papers on the shelf behind her.

“Morning Sandra. Mind telling me your early morning secrets?” asked Lily.

“Mhm? What do you mean Lily?” replied Sandra.

She turned from the pile of papers, and Lily almost dropped her coffee when she saw Sandra’s decidedly *not* perky morning face. In fact, this was probably the most rumpled she’d ever seen Sandra. Her suit was wrinkled, her eyes were red from what looked like crying, and her makeup was in desperate need of touching up. Not as badly as Lily’s, but still, Sandra *never* looked less than perfect.

What the hell?

“Oh! Lily, you have some lines on your face,” said Sandra, pointing around her own eyes.

Lily rolled her eyes, “Yeah yeah, I know. But what about *you*? Were you here all night? Did you even sleep?”

Sandra gave her a confused look before glancing at her computer screen, her eyes widening in surprise. “Oh, I guess I… I lost track of time.”

“Doing what exactly?”

“Oh I had to update some profiles. Sorting new employees into teams. I did another round of background checks. Um, made sure the hostages we rescued are receiving the assistance they’re entitled to, I thought I’d just look into that. Tried to see if any reports of newly discovered secret lairs have been sent to Central. Um…”

Lily raised an eyebrow as Sandra continued listing off things she had done last night. Most of which was superfluous double-checking, or

was unrelated to her job description, and none of it was important enough to explain why she felt the need to stay up all night working.

Lily set her coffee on Sandra's desk and pulled up a seat. "Alright Sandra. Spill. What the hell's got you so wound up?"

Sandra visibly deflated, whatever energy had been sustaining her workaholic spree banished by the direct question. "I had a bit of an argument with Imp about proper interrogation procedures," she replied.

"Do I need to castrate him?"

Sandra snorted, "No no, but I learned some things about Tofu that I rather wouldn't have."

"The twerp? What did he do?"

"Not what he did, what was done *to* him. Lily he's… he's like Olson."

"He's a lab rat!?"

"Don't use that term."

"Yeah yeah, it explains a lot though. Was it the rat guy from last night?"

"Tofu didn't say, but I don't think so. Imp and the rest found all the children who went missing, so it seems the 'rat man' wasn't completely amoral."

"Well shit, at least there's a silver lining to all the crap he put us through," replied Lily. Then a thought occurred to her. "What about that girl Tofu dragged in? Is she in the same boat?"

"No, she's… well, her circumstances aren't any better," said Sandra sadly. She handed Lily a printout. It was an incident report for Nicole's mutation. They were supposed to be completely confidential

and only available to medical personnel, so Lily was surprised to see that Sandra had it until she saw the details. Records like that were only released to the public in the case of bad triggers and...

"This can't be right. It says her mutation was a class four? And she was sent to... good lord, *Tartarus* for her rehabilitation? That's a containment facility, not a hospital. What the fuck?"

"Supposedly they didn't have a facility that could accommodate her needs. She was kept there for a few months before another one of the… patients, caused a containment breach, and Nicole disappeared in the confusion."

Lily took a moment to absorb that information. She remembered the physical and mental rehabilitation she'd needed to go through after her own mutation, and while it was nothing too terrible, it wasn't a pleasant memory. Trying to imagine going through it while confined to a place like Tartarus gave her goosebumps.

This explains why Sandra's having a meltdown though. The stuff with kids always hits her hard. I'm gonna need to have a little 'talk' with Imp later.

Lily thought it over briefly and then sighed, deciding to get it over with. "Alright Sandra, give me what you've put together so far and I'll do Nicole's interview."

"Oh it's fine Lily, I can handle it. I know how they annoy you."

"Nope. You've got a date with a pillow or you won't be ready to go out drinking tonight."

"Lily, I can't do that now. There's too many things to be done."

"Like you haven't already organized it all for the interns to handle.

Come on Sandra, Tofu's fine, Nicole's safe downstairs, and all the Tots are rescued. Enough depressing shit, let's paint the town red."

Sandra waffled for a second, but eventually gave in with a small smile. "Alright. I suppose I could use a good drink. Let me just give these forms to Gregory and then I'll get out of your hair…" then her smile turned mischievous, "…unless *you* want to give the forms to Gregory? I'm sure he'd *appreciate* it."

Lily rolled her eyes, not bothering to deny what Sandra had noticed. It wouldn't do any good anyways.

__Thump__

I was, once again, face up on the practice mat.

Environmental interference.

Adder had managed to completely dodge my grapple attempt, and then followed that up with a kick that moved my leg just enough to destabilize my center of gravity. It shouldn't have worked; I was far too heavy for someone as small as Adder to be able to produce enough force to move my leg, but the mat we were fighting on slipped when I went for the grapple. Her kick added the last bit of force needed to unbalance me.

"Figured it out yet?" asked Adder.

"…Are you sure you don't have a power?"

Adder just laughed.

I got up from the mat. Adder and I had been sparring for half an hour now, and my results were… mixed. On one hand, Adder had been having a much harder time knocking me down due to my much more solid frame. On the other hand... she was still managing to knock me down.

“It seems my weight is causing the mats to slip,” I finally answered.

“Yup, you’re pulling up the adhesive. You weigh too much and it’s not being distributed over a wide enough area when you kick off. Why exactly are you so heavy anyways? You weren’t before, is something wrong?”

“No, I just made a few internal changes.”

“Like what? Filling your belly with lead? Where are you even keeping it all? And why?” she poked at my stomach.

“Umm…”

She rolled her eyes, “You don’t need to tell me every little detail you wussy, but I can’t help you improve if I don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

I considered it. Sharing the specific mechanics of my abilities was too risky, but if she could help me improve… I supposed an abridged explanation wouldn’t give away anything she didn’t already know.

“It’s for fuel compression,” I supplied as an answer. “Shifting takes a lot of calories.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Can’t you just eat a speedster bar?”

“Yes, but keeping energy in reserve is vital.”

“Well yeah, but you’re kinda overdoing it. You need to burn some of that fat off.”

“It’s not fat, it’s compressed muscle tissue.”

She frowned, “That’s… at your weight… and if that’s all muscle…”

Her eyes narrowed at me, and an awkward silence stretched until she finally spoke again.

“Follow me.”

Adder led me over to the training equipment side of the gym, and stopped in front of an oddly shaped machine next to the wall. It had a spring mechanism with a circular pad attached to it. Imp had used it as a strength tester during the orientation.

“Hit it as hard as you can,” Adder ordered.

I stood in front of the pad and set my stance before punching it. The spring compressed and a calculated number was displayed on the machine a second later. I didn’t really think a blunt measurement like this was all that useful for combat calculations, but I admit I was pleased when the number was four times larger than during the orientation.

“No no no,” dismissed Adder, “Not like that. Use your power too, like when you fought Magenta. Hit it like you **mean** it.”

I turned back to the target and unfolded my limbs. My knees reversed (without a pop), and most of the joints in my arms and legs unhinged so the muscles could properly unpack. My torso and neck both stretched as my spine extended, the new folded muscle that connected the individual segments stretching and becoming the main support for my body. I was now closer to eight feet tall like Gregor, although much skinnier as my muscles were stretched over my elongated frame, which was hunched over for stability.

Once finished, I faced the target again and punched. Punching was different in my combat form; while disguised as a human the force of my punch relied on synchronizing muscles along my entire frame, while in my new combat form the motion is a bit more like a whip, the foldable muscle twisting in sequence down my arm until the final movement snaps my fist with incredible force. It took an hour or so when I was practicing to get my hands to the point they wouldn't break with the force of the impact.

My fist hit the punch pad with a snap. The spring supporting the pad jolted quite a bit more this time, and a second later the machine spit out a number that was just over nine times larger than the one from orientation. I hadn't measured my combat form performance back then, but I was sure I had improved considerably, and I was sure I could get the number even higher with more practice. When I turned to face Adder she was squinting, almost glaring, at the number on the machine.

"Hmm… That's quite a bit higher than what we have recorded for you," she finally said, eyeing me up and down.

"I've made multiple improvements since the last time it was measured."

“Indeed. Follow me.” She led me back through the cluster of training machines to the mats. “So. There’s two main things I want to go over with you. The first of which is that you’ve been sandbagging in our spars.”

“Sandbagging?”

“Holding back. I assume how you look now is what you’re most comfortable with?”

“When fighting yes.”

“Then that’s what you’ll practice with. No point wasting time with the normal stuff if you aren’t even gonna use it in a real fight.”

“But who will I spar against?”

“Me of course.”

“Er, I’ve been testing my punches on concrete.”

“Oh-ho! The student is worried about the teacher, how cute. Get on the damn mat.”

I took a position on the practice mat while she went to her duffel bag which had been placed to the side. Out of it she pulled a helmet (not a mask, but some kind of protective gear), and two… sticks? She flicked them and they periscoped out, two-and-a-half feet at full extension.

“The second point I need to go over with you is: you’re too heavy. You look like a giant scarecrow yet you’re over half again the weight of the heaviest minion in HH. The fact your spine hasn't snapped in half from the weight is mind-boggling.”

“The foldable musc-”

“Blah blah blah. The point is that you need to lose weight.”

“But I don’t want to lose weight.” I had it precisely calibrated to maximize my energy stores.

“No worries. I’ve got that problem covered.”

Adder clicked a button on the sticks she was holding, and they lit up with a hum. A faint purplish chrona shimmered around them.

“Time for you to go on a diet.”

...A what now?

Ch40 Cake

Imp

It had been a long night, which made for a quiet morning. Imp enjoyed these calm mornings after a successful job. They were one of the best parts of working a night shift. Like Sandra he'd also worked through the night, but unlike her he had long ago adjusted to a nighttime schedule. Being the primary sneak for Hellion's Henchmen would do that.

He took another sip of the tea he was drinking in the HH cafeteria. Caffeine free. Unlike everyone else around him, he didn't want to wake himself up. It was technically early in the morning, but for him it was the end of a long and fruitful day, and he was going to head to bed in a bit.

Shame I didn't find anything on the Espada though.

That was the one thing that irked him. Kidnapping mutants, and then using their bodies to create a monster army which would hypothetically increase anti-mutant sentiment? That had Espada written all over it, but when they found the guy responsible there wasn't even a hint of their involvement. Tofu had given Imp a rundown of everything the 'rat-stitcher' had said, and as far as anyone could tell this was just a random Oddity of summer. Just a highschool math teacher who had reached his wit's end. If the Espada were still around, it seemed HH would just have to wait and see what happened.

Meh. Maybe they got eaten by a rat. The thought made him smile.

He took a bite of his bagel with cream cheese substitute, and continued reading the morning news on his phone. The rat story was the biggest news in E13 for now, which meant that nothing else too drastic was taking place. Yep, just a nice, quiet morning.

clack* *clack

Two clawed hands hit the table next to him, and Imp looked up to find a looming Viper staring daggers. She didn't look like she was in a good mood, but then again she was always rather testy in the morning. Maybe this wasn't about-

"What the hell did you say to Sandra?"

-nope, it was.

Imp stifled a sigh and tried to subtly move his tea away from her. He could technically teleport away if she threw it at him, but the last time he did that she signed him up to fifty different spam e-mail services. Some things even teleportation couldn't dodge.

"I just asked her to listen in while I asked Tofu some questions, Viper."

"Uh huh. You *do* know she already gave Tofu a thorough interview right? With questions she *expressly* designed to get the answers HH wants without prying into personal details, *right*? And you *definitely* remember how Sandra gets about misuse of her power, *right*? Or did

you somehow think-"

"Alright, alright Viper, I get it! I was already going to apologise to her later."

"In person."

"Of course."

"And no bullshit about it being your job."

"Wasn't gonna bring it up."

"And a pastry from that bakery she likes."

"Sure."

"And I'll castrate you if you don't."

"*Okay*, damn!"

"…"

"…"

"Well?" said Viper, who was still looming over Imp.

"Well what?"

"What was so damn important you felt you had to interrogate the twerp? He do something fishy?"

Imp sighed, "Yes and no. On one hand he's followed every order I've given him to a T, like a seasoned minion, but on the other hand he acts like he's been living under a rock his whole life."

"Which, given his circumstances, makes *perfect sense*."

"Right, but it also leads to certain incidents that… set off a few alarm bells. Here, this is from the job last night."

Imp fiddled with his phone and then showed it to Viper. It was a picture of a message scrawled onto a wall in messy graffiti.

> Please refrain from indiscriminately attacking civilians in Hellion's territory.
>
> Thank you.

Viper didn't get it. "Okay? So he…?"

"Did exactly what I told him to do. Kill the rat guy, and make a message out of him so people don't follow his example. Interesting font wouldn't you say?"

Viper's brow furrowed before she turned back to the picture and squinted at the letters to try and spot what Imp was talking about. It took her a few seconds to realize the message wasn't on a wall, it was on the floor. Tofu had taken Imp's order quite literally, and the… materials wouldn't have adhered to the wall.

"Oh *ew*."

"Yeah. I'm actually kinda impressed at how straight the lines are. He used every part of the buffalo."

"Oh *gross* Imp."

"Yeah, but you see why I needed to do a double check?"

"Yes, jeez. Put it away please. Way too early in the day for *that*."

"How do you think *I* feel? I'm heading off to bed. Gonna make for an interesting nightmare later."

"Make sure Sandra doesn't see it."

“Pft, please. She’d stick the kid in therapy for the rest of his natural life.”

Viper considered it for a moment. “...You think maybe we should stick him in there anyways?”

Before Imp could answer, a loud ***bang*** sounded through the cafeteria as the doors to the training rooms burst open, and Tofu came barreling out. His feet skid on the smooth tile for a second, and then he started power-walking for the elevators, which was more like a fast jog since his legs were still shifted. Adder soon followed hot on his heels.

“Tofu, where are you going?”

“SORRY ADDER I HAVE TO GO! I NEED TO GO MAKE MEATLOAF!”

“If this is about the batons I was joking! There’s other ways to diet.”

“I DON'T WANT TO DIET!”

“Get back here!”

Tofu stayed ahead of Adder as she tried to catch up to him, and they slowly sped up until Adder was basically just chasing Tofu around the cafeteria and up and down the halls. As the chase continued down towards the garage, the other minions started taking bets.

“Eh, I think he’ll be fine.”

Tofu

Adder has impressive skills for a baseline human. Peak physical health for her size, years of training, and absolutely astounding reflexes. But one thing she can't do? Stick to the ceiling.

“Tofu get down from there. You’re being ridiculous.”

“I don’t think your dieting method is work safe.”

“Tofu, I had them on the lowest setting, all they do is glow and look menacing at that level. Would you please come down?”

Hmm…

“I’ll tell you how I keep predicting your moves.”

I climbed down from the ceiling corner I wedged myself into, but stood out of arm's reach. Hopefully this wasn't a trick.

Adder rolled her eyes. “Alright, you ready for the super secret special technique?”

“Yes.”

“You know how when you’re practicing martial arts, one of the goals is to get rid of unnecessary movements?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you are really, really good at doing that. Like, down to the

centimeter accurate. Which is quite impressive… annnnnd it makes you predictable. You almost always choose the correct movement for the situation, but that makes it easy for me to pick the correct move to counter with. The fact that you can repeat the same movement in the exact same way every single time just makes it even easier for me."

I thought that over.

"So... how do I choose what to do?"

"Well if you have more experience than your opponent you can just keep picking the moves that slowly edge the fight in your favor, which is what I've been doing, *or* you can just pick a slightly worse move at random. Even if it's not the absolute best choice, it'll throw your opponent off your rhythm."

"...So in order to succeed, I have to be… ***less*** efficient?"

"Versus someone like me at least. You can still fight like you normally do against thugs and stuff though."

Less efficiency could sometimes be the correct option. That was just so… *wrong*.

"Anyways Tofu, I need to go help the regulars that aren't early risers, so we'll call it quits for today. I'll try to think of methods to help you train if you're dead set on being heavy. I can't really spar with you if a single bad hit will brain me."

"It's fine Adder. If you think it will hinder me I'll dump the extra weight." I was reluctant to dump my stockpiled energy reserves, but I was not about to let it compromise my immediate survival. It was actually the shock batons that had truly worried me. Even a small

electrical discharge would disrupt the micro unit signals, and there was a decent chance they would self-destruct before I could reestablish control. I didn't want to display that vulnerability if I could help it.

"So what was up with the scaredy cat routine?"

I picked an excuse that would align with my 'backstory'.

"I just don't like getting shocked. Bad memories."

"Ah, sorry about teasing you with it then."

"No worries."

"See you again tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

More improvement was necessary. But for now, it was time for meatloaf.

Before I left the base, I checked to make sure that Nicole was still asleep and that Mikey was on the schedule for today. I then sent a text to both Cindy and Mikey asking them to join me for lunch at the base later today, and went to the grocery store to get ingredients.

The grocery store really was a relaxing place. Food everywhere, everything properly labeled, good field of vision due to all the mirrored surfaces and yet plenty of places to duck for cover. Even the temperature was kept stable using an A/C at full blast. It reminded

me of the rat-stitcher's pantry a bit. That place had been relaxing as well. Come to think of it, any place where I was surrounded by food marked a measured reduction in stress levels from Human.exe. Maybe that was part of the reason I liked crowds? As long as they weren't looking at me at least.

I went down the aisle with my complimentary kart, grabbing ingredients for the meatloaf. It was all easy to find since I'd mapped out the store my last time here, but I was taking my time in order to practice being… inefficient.

It was a detail that I had overlooked in my effort to improve; humans were, by and large, inefficient. If I wanted to hide within the general populace, a certain degree of inefficiency would actually *help* my disguise, not hinder it. Circumstances in the testing lab had demanded that I strive for excellence at all times in order to survive, and comparing successful examples such as Hellion's Henchmen, to inefficient and unsuccessful examples like the rat stitcher, had convinced me that the same held true outside of the lab. Technically it still did, but I had not considered just how large the acceptable margin of error was.

It did explain quite a few things that had puzzled me about human behavior. Things like Mikey's reluctance to attend Adder's training sessions, or how Maz didn't know her children would share her mutation made a lot more sense now. They had decided to ignore things they thought had little relevance, in favor of things that had more relevance. It wasn't laziness or a flaw; they were reducing effort in an unneeded area. Maz's children potentially sharing her mutation would not negatively affect her or them, so why waste time seeking information on the subject beforehand? Especially if nothing could be done about it regardless of the answer? And Mikey not seeking extra training was because… well, I couldn't imagine how combat training would be unimportant. Maybe he was simply incorrectly sorting his priorities? Even I did that sometimes. Human thought processes were

decidedly... focused, and it was easy to get too drawn into a singular goal.

Maybe purposeful inefficiency was a self-defense mechanism against pursuing an overly resource intensive goal? I myself had been trying to increase combat survivability, maximize energy storage, and maintain a perfect disguise all at the same time, straining my efforts in each area in order to maximize all of them. Like Adder said; a perfect approach would work only until I encountered a problem that was simply outside of my capabilities. Then it would fail spectacularly. By introducing some slack into lower priority areas of improvement, it would increase available resources in more fruitful endeavors, and would decrease the odds of me picking a course of action that was too difficult and had the potential to fail. After all, an organism that *knew* it couldn't solve an electric puzzle trap would never attempt to do so, and therefore avoid the inevitable costly failure. I wasn't in the test chambers anymore; I could always walk away from said impossible problem.

… I'd *hated* electric puzzle tests.

I finished up my tour of the grocery store, finding several new items that hadn't been stocked the last time I came (hah, inefficiency was already helping to discover new options). The ingredients I needed were located where I remembered, but when I wanted to get the meat, I needed to ask a clerk to retrieve it from a sealed locker. Odd Summer had caused the price of meat to skyrocket, so much so that I briefly considered using a substitution like tofu, or perhaps whatever I could hunt up close to the surface of E13. Eventually though, I just decided to splurge and buy the ground beef. I didn't know what a substitution would do to the flavor, and besides, I was practicing inefficiency.

I paid for my ingredients and brought them to my apartment. The actual cooking of the meatloaf wasn't that hard, just mix the

ingredients in the proper order and then place in the oven until ready, so I was left with an hour to spend while I waited for it to finish baking. I watered my plant, added the knives I got from the rat-stitcher job to my growing collection, and then I decided to deal with my weight problem. Fortunately, humans equipped their dens with easy to use waste removal units, so I got to experience using a toilet for the first time. I took the opportunity to test a few internal designs using the extra resources, but once I was finished, my micro units broke down the excess mass into a fine carbon powder, and flush by flush, one hundred pounds of compressed sugar structures, redundant tissues, and excess muscle all went down the drain. No fat though. I hadn't lied to Adder, fat was a nice storage method, but it didn't reach the capacity I had wanted.

It felt like a huge waste to get rid of it all, even if I knew it was for a purpose. My energy reserves dropped to five weeks worth, and while I was *not* happy about that, I admittedly felt a lot less… clunky. The folded muscle that remained could unpack faster, and I didn't need to monitor the placement of my foldholds as thoroughly. Once I readjusted again, I would be able to freely spar with Adder since there was less of a chance of accidentally damaging her. While I had yet to win against her I did sometimes manage to land a hit, and she was right about the risk of 'braining' or otherwise permanently injuring her. I still had a lot I could learn from her, and needing to find a new teacher would be troublesome.

Oh! And I had more room for knives now too. So that was a plus.

I spent the rest of the hour playing Gribblin Tamer on my phone. The meatloaf finished while I was trying to practice inefficiency inside of the game. I was in the middle of a boss fight, and I had been brought to low hp by one of the unavoidable attacks the boss did when it went down to half health. Normally at this point I continued to carefully dodge until I managed to whittle the boss's hp down and kill him, but there *was* another way to do this that would give me

more leeway and speed things up.

I could use a potion...

Instead I paused the game, and resolved to ask Nicole about it at lunch. If she could confirm I wouldn't need it later, I would consider it. Unlike in real life I had no inventory limitations inside the game, so I did not see the point in wasting items. Inefficiency was surprisingly difficult sometimes. Humans made it look so easy.

As far as I could tell the meatloaf was done. The only meat I had ever cooked was the slig when I was hunting with Nicole, so I didn't have enough examples to compare it to. It smelled great though, and testing a small piece of it confirmed it wouldn't cause any problems for a human digestive system. I would simply have to trust that the cooking instructions were correct.

I sent a text to Mikey and Cindy letting them know I was on my way (they had both confirmed they would be able to join me), and then sent a text to Nicole telling her I was coming by with food. She didn't send an immediate response, so I assumed she was still sleeping. Hopefully she wasn't hibernating to heal herself; I doubted she could eat while sleeping.

I cut the meatloaf into four portions and placed it into containers I bought for that express purpose, and grabbed some of the leftover paper plates and plastic utensils from when I was cooking burgers with Mikey. Then I used the elevator in the apartment building to head to the base. Mikey met me in the cafeteria.

“Hey there Tofu, how’s it going?”

“Good. I believe the meatloaf came out well.”

“You made meatloaf?”

“Yes, I decided to splurge.”

Mikey and I talked for a few minutes before Ifrit showed up. She was wearing her mask and gauntlets since she had a job that started after lunch.

Ifrit held a hand out to Mikey and greeted him with a simple “Ifrit.”

“Oh, um, Mikey. Nice to meet you,” replied Mikey, and he shook her gauntlet somewhat warily.

I was a bit confused by their odd interaction. Mikey had never talked to Cindy while she was in costume, so I guess they were pretending to be meeting for the first time? Perhaps for the benefit of reinforcing the separation between Ifrit and her civilian disguise? That was rather clever. I couldn’t think of any other reason for it, as Mikey was too perceptive to not have noticed that Cindy was Ifrit, and even if he somehow hadn’t noticed, Cindy would have told him by now right?

Eh, it wasn’t that important. What *was* important was that I hadn’t gotten a message back from Nicole yet. It wouldn’t make much sense to have lunch without her, so I decided to lead Mikey and Ifrit to the room where I had left her last night. I could introduce them, and then we could all eat meatloaf together.

I was looking forward to this.

Nicole

Nicole was sleeping, caught in that glorious moment where you were starting to wake up, but were still dreaming at the same time. She'd just finished up what felt like the most restful sleep of her life, and she was nestled into the warm and fluffy blankets of her bed, ignorant of the world around her. Several texts had been announced by her phone and completely ignored, and while she was hungry after apparently sleeping through breakfast, she didn't want to leave her fuzzy dreamscape. She couldn't even remember if it was the weekend or a school day, but she had heard the sounds of her parents moving around from beyond her door, so she was confident they would have gotten her out of bed by this point if she needed to get ready for class.

If only my tail wasn't so sore, then this would be perfect.

The errant thought stuck. She tried to cling to sleep, but no amount of readjusting would relieve the soreness in her extremities. Was she coming down with a bad flu? Was that why she was still in bed? She'd already had her benedicci booster shot though... Oh! The doctor said she might feel sick for a day or two after the injection, that must have been what she was feeling.

But… hadn't her benedicci shot been ages ago?

It was no use, facts of reality kept bombarding her half-dreaming

mind, and slowly she was forced into the world of the waking. She woke up suddenly, and for a moment the last vestiges of her dreams overlapped with the real world just enough to confuse her one last time.

That's not my ceiling...

...Of course it wasn't. It wasn't her bed either, nor her blankets, nor her room.

It wasn't even her original body.

She rolled onto her side for a second, facing the wall and trying to ignore the pain of having her wonderful dream ripped away from her. It had been a long, long time since she'd last had that dream, and the hurt felt fresher than normal because of it. Nicole allowed herself a few moments to feel sorry for herself, before finally taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Then she rolled over again, and started working herself into a pseudo sitting position on the edge of the bed to take in her surroundings. Last night she had been kind of out of it.

I really am in an evil lair. That was the real part.

There wasn't much to look at in the windowless room, so she didn't have an excuse to ignore the soreness and itching any longer. Nicole slowly coiled her tail in from where it was flopped off the end of the bed, and checked the damage. She was surprised at how much had regenerated while she was sleeping. All of the tail portion had reformed, and the giant lump at the end looked like it was ready to

begin the next phase of regeneration, slightly bloated as new legs formed inside. She'd been injured like this twice before, and knew what to expect in terms of regrowth. The first time had been her initial mutation, and the second was a misguided attempt between her and her doctors to 'remove' the scorpion half, seeing as none of her vital organs were contained within it. It hadn't worked, and if anything the scorpion half had regenerated larger and stronger than ever.

Ugh, I hope I can still fit through the tunnels after this. Wouldn't that be ironic...

Her stomach gurgled, reminding her that regenerating her lost body wasn't free, and it wanted to be paid. She didn't have any idea how to go about getting food though (she didn't remember the route to the cafeteria, and was she even allowed to eat there?), so she grabbed her phone to talk with Tofu. The first thing she saw was the multiple texts he had sent her that she missed. Tofu often sent texts about random things, or asking silly questions, and she started to smile as she read through the long list of them.

T: Concrete is hard to practice martial arts on.

T: Adder said I need to diet?

T: Diets are dangerous!

T: I escaped.

T: Hey Nicole, you're still asleep so I'm just letting you know I will be bringing some lunch by later. You can get breakfast in the cafeteria if you wake up early (you should, they have muffins).

T: Hey Nicole, I'm at the grocery store for ingredients. Is there anything special I should know about meatloaf?

T: Do I need a bread pan to make meatloaf? Or is there a meat pan?

T: Meat prices are so high!

T: Made it to the level twelve ice boss in Gribblin Tamer. Are there any secrets in the treasure room?

Nicole's mood perked up as she read through the texts. Tofu sent them at all hours of the day, and always answered immediately as long as his phone was on. It was like he never slept. Nicole had a few online acquaintances she talked to now and then, mostly from mutual games they played, but Tofu was the first person who kept in real contact. For anyone else it might have been *too* much contact, but Nicole didn't mind. Living in a sewer was decidedly lonely, and she appreciated Tofu's willingness to keep in touch. Reading the wall of texts he'd sent was a great way to start the day... right up until she read the last of the messages.

T: I think the Meatloaf is almost done. I'll be coming by soon.

T: Met up with Mikey in the cafeteria.

T: Met up with Ifrit at the cafeteria.

T: Are you not up yet?

T: No worries. We'll come wake you up.

T: On our way.

Wait. What!? Oh crap!

Nicole had forgotten what Tofu said about introducing his friends, and she felt her stomach drop at realizing she would have to meet

new people, and not just any people. These were Tofu's *friends*, and she needed to make a good first impression. The phone *blipped* in her hand, and a new message came in.

T: Almost there.

"Eep!"

I need to get ready!

But how? All she had was her shirt from yesterday that she had slept in and was still wearing, and her tool apron which was basically useless to her right now.

No wait! My comb should be in there somewhere!

She grabbed her apron off the floor in a panic. It was doubtful that a small comb would tame her bedhead and magically make her presentable, but she had to try *something*! She had been in a *sewer* yesterday! The large amount of nessies around her home had kept it clean enough, but still! She wouldn't feel presentable until she'd had a chance to wash off the *feeling* of being dirty.

A ***knock*** at the door startled her, and she slipped off the edge of the bed in surprise.

"Hello Nicole, are you up yet? I brought meatloaf and friends."

AHHHHHHHHH!!!

“J-just a minute Tofu!”

She wavered back and forth for a few seconds, trying to come up with something and of course failing to come up with anything. Maybe Odd Summer would be extra special, super nice and decide to give her a power to phase through floors despite mutavus having already burned out her ability to get a power?

...Nothing? Yeah I thought so.

Nicole took a deep breath and steadied herself, before getting her tail under her and lifting her torso off the floor. It worked well enough, her tail acted a bit like a snake’s, and slowly she slithered to the door to greet Tofu. Maybe… maybe she could ask Tofu to come back in a bit? He and his friends could go eat while she found a place to freshen up? She wasn’t trying to put off meeting them, she just needed a bit more time to get presentable (and get used to the idea of meeting new people).

Nicole reached up and grabbed the doorknob, twisted it, and slowly lifted herself higher off the floor while pulling the door out. As she did so, she made the mistake of trying to put weight on the end of her tail, as she was used to reflexively using her scorpion half as the anchor for lifting herself. A sharp pain went *allll* the way up her side.

“Ack!”

Nicole fell over as her tail spasmed. She tried to grab the door and slipped, instead flinging the door open wide and face planting herself on the ground right in front of Tofu and two others. As the door

smacked the wall, she felt a tearing twinge along the sides of the lump at the end of her tail. A feeling she recognized.

Oh no...

The sides of the lump split open, and the first three pairs of new legs burst forth, all six of them involuntarily twitching and shuddering as the nerves came online. Everyone present was too stunned to speak. Well, mostly everyone.

“Oh good. You’re regenerating nicely. I was worried about that,” said Tofu cheerily.

...I deserve floor phasing powers.

Tofu

We decided to have lunch in the rec room. Nicole wasn’t really feeling up to being in a more public place like the cafeteria, so I pulled a table over to the door so she could hide her injury in her room while eating with us. I helped with some quick introductions, and then set about placing utensils and serving out portions. Conversation was somewhat… stunted, as everyone began eating. More so than I had come to expect from young humans. They assured me that the meatloaf tasted fine when I asked though, so that was good.

Oh well, even if this plan didn't work to convince Nicole, I was sure I could eventually get her to join Hellion's Henchmen. I doubted she could go anywhere until she regenerated more, and by my estimates she was still two weeks or so off at her current rate, so I would have plenty of opportunity later. I would figure something out.

Either way, I was still immensely happy with how things had turned out. So much so, that I almost wished I could have shared some meatloaf with the rat-stitcher. I had thanked him for his help before I killed him, but considering the amazing advancements I had made due to opportunities he created, it still somewhat felt like I owed him.

After all, it wasn't every day you got to have your friends, and eat them too.

Ch? Rubber Chicken

The lunch with my friends went fine. They all said that the meatloaf I made was the best they ever tasted, and that they'd like to join my harem since I was a great provider. I wasn't sure what they meant until I looked up the word, and I could immediately tell it would cause problems. Offspring wasn't a possibilty for me since I wasn't really a human, and multiple offspring seemed to be the main point of a harem. Luckily, both Mikey and Ifrit needed to get back to work, and Nicole had agreed to an interview, so I decided to ignore the problem for now.

Instead, I decided to do a little more investigation into multiple brains. Some of the makeshift designs I made while dumping my excess weight had shown promise, so I wanted to do some more testing. The fact that it gave me an excuse to eat some more and regain some lost calories had nothing to do with my decision.

I went back to my apartment so I could work in privacy. One of the advantages of having my own apartment was that I could stock it with supplies, and I would need some of them now to work on the brains. The fact that I'd needed to dump my energy reserves had prompted me to buy multiple bags of sugar while I was shopping for meatloaf ingredients. It wasn't as good as my own calorie storage methods since I would need to absorb it first, but it was the best I could think of until I found a supply of speedster energy bars. Rattleback was so stingy with them.

I began my experiment by forming two brains, and running Human.exe on both at the same time. Thanks to what I learned from Nicole and the will-o-wisp, the hierarchy structure between my core and the two brains prevented the micro units from becoming confused about whether or not they were seperated, and both brains continued to function even when the thought processes reached 74.235323% divergence.

I was thinking of ways to use this to my advantage, when I noticed something odd. When I turned Human.exe off and on while the other

brain was already running Human.exe, I noticed a small fraction of a second where I could watch Human.exe ‘unpack’ before its contents were used to run a human mind. I’d never before seen a glimpse into the black box that was Human.exe, so immediately I began experimenting with turning it off and on over and over, so that I could glimpse more and more of the inner workings of Human.exe.

This continued for a few hours, until I finally managed to see enough of the code to identify several functions of Human.exe that I had yet to access. I made a back-up copy of my memories and Human.exe in case anything went wrong, before attempting to activate one of the functions.

“Status”

Name: Tofu	Species: Soy Product	Class: Minion
Stats:	Modifiers:	Abilities:
Strength: 14	+2	Shapeshift: Take the shape and appearance of a creature/object. Your stats stay the same.
Dexterity: 20	+5	Omnivore Prime: You can eat anything. You gain the natural abilities of organisms you eat.
Constitution: 20	+5	Adorable: Your social faux pas are viewed as being cute/quirky instead of creepy.
Intelligence: 16	+3	Human.exe: You are treated as a human in all social situations.
Wisdom: 2	-4	Plot Armor: You are the main character, and cannot be reduced below 1hp during minor plot archs

	(psychological damage still applies as normal).
Charisma: 18	+4

I didn't know what to make of it. It somewhat reminded me of the info pages in Gribblin Tamer, but modified to somewhat resemble me?

New Quest: Investigate the Dark Alley

I recognized quests at least. In Gribblin Tamer they usually gave a reward of some kind, so I decided to investigate. Small navigation markings appeared in my vision, similar to the ones my mask used to lead me to the safe room after the orientation job. It led me to a small alley a few blocks away, on the darkened ground floor where there were roads for cars, and where most lighting was provided artificially. When I entered the alley, a man popped out from a side door.

"Yo, what do you think you're doing in my alley punk? If you wanna go through here you gotta pony up the toll small fry."

Thug lvl3

Numbers popped up for the thug in my vision which I found strange. Was this what I needed to investigate? Or did I need to fight him like in video games now?

I decided against it, instead pulling out my HH minion mask, prompting an apology from him and his subsequent retreat. Strangely that completed the quest, and before my eyes a soda packet materialized from thin air, and then dropped into my open hand. Then a second quest popped up.

It gave free resources! This was amazing! If the quests progressed like the ones in Gribblin Tamer, it was safe to assume the rewards would get better and better until perhaps I would start to receive rations like the speedster energy bars. I hurried to follow the markers to the next location…

...but as I stepped out of the alley I made a fatal mistake. The sidewalks were narrow at this level, and quite frankly poor protection for the civilians that travelled them. A horn bellowed, and I turned to view beaming headlights sandwiching a shiny chrome grill. In the dark conditions of the bottom level, and with the fiery flames that engulfed the cab, the grill of the truck looked like a predator's teeth, smiling in victory.

Flaming Truck-san lvl???

I died.

And woke up under my bed with a start, slamming my head into the metal frame above me. I had been trying to simulate the 'dreaming' functions of Human.exe, which resulted in the surprisingly realistic hallucination. I didn't like it. Supposedly most humans did this every night, but I couldn't see the appeal. It wasn't as efficient as just turning Human.exe off for a few hours, and the hallucination didn't make for good combat data. Quite frankly the memories it generated seemed like a waste of memory.

> Memory#547275636b73616e636f6d6d657468
> deleted.

I went back to sleep.

(author's note: Happy April Fools day! Real chapter tomorrow.)

Ch41 Smells Fishy

Ifrit

Cindy had no idea how to handle this.

Tofu had texted her that morning with a rather unique situation. His friend had been attacked by those rat things from the mall and was now homeless, and he was trying to help her get back on her feet, which he needed Cindy's help to do. When she asked for more details, he explained that he wanted to get his friend a job with HH, but she was very shy, and understandably hesitant about joining a criminal organization, so Tofu needed help convincing her. For *whatever* reason, he thought that making meatloaf for lunch was the way to go about this.

Once Cindy understood the situation a bit more, and realized what Tofu's plan was, she jumped on the chance to help out. This was half the reason she'd joined her mother's organization in the first place. While HH was technically a criminal organization, it also often served as a springboard for people who just didn't quite fit into Fortress City's socio-economic dynamic. People like Gregor and Dillo, who's mutations had lost them their jobs and almost everything else, or like Pebbles and Buzzer, who just sort of gravitated towards trouble and needed the henching job to ground themselves.

So, realizing that Tofu's friend likely needed proof that HH was a legitimate, safe, and sane option, and that Tofu likely wasn't the best person to sell the idea, Cindy dressed in her costume, and prepared herself to present a reasonable, respectable example of an HH employee.

The first hiccup occured when Tofu neglected to tell her that Mikey would be coming to this lunch gathering. She'd been thrown off her rhythm seeing one of the new friends she'd been hanging out with in a work setting, and training had kicked in. One of the most important rules for mask work that had been drilled into her from a young age was that you kept your civilian and cowl identities separate at all costs. Even in a situation where it was impossible (like with impractical mutations), you maintained the facade. Best case scenario was that you remained undiscovered and could go home after a day of henching with no one the wiser. In the worst case scenario your lawyer would at least be left with a legal leg to stand on, as a lot of Fortress City's mask rules had been created with the separation between mask and civilian identity in mind. When Overlord had died, and Fortress City was forced to join United North America, it had been a shock to the U.N.A that they couldn't just change those rules. When they tried, parts of Fortress City's infrastructure (namely the all-important wall) instantly stopped working until the changes were undone, a last middle finger from Fortress City's creator towards the U.N.A.

And so, with all those thoughts swirling in her head, Cindy had introduced herself as Ifrit to Mikey. When Mikey showed obvious surprise at meeting 'Ifrit', Cindy realized that she had never actually told Mikey that she worked as a powered minion. In fact, with her use of the inhaler to change her voice, and with all the smoke from Tofu's burned food when they first met, she realized that Mikey had never even heard her natural raspy voice before. Combined with the powered minion mask and costume, it meant Mikey didn't recognize her. To him, Ifrit was some masked minion that was Tofu's coworker, and Cindy was a completely normal, non-mutant girl that just happened to have a parent in the accounting department of an evil villain's criminal organization.

Cindy knew she should correct that misunderstanding of course, they would be around each other a lot both at work and in civilian life,

and he already knew Cindy was involved in the cowl life anyways, even if he didn't know the full extent. But, it had been kind of an awkward moment when she introduced 'Ifrit' to him, and then the moment passed, and then it would have just been weird to suddenly say she was Cindy minutes after introducing herself as Ifrit right? It wouldn't do any harm to let him think 'Cindy' was just a normal girl a little longer, right? He'd probably figure it out himself later anyways.

So Cindy put it off for a little while. Besides, the important thing right now was to help Tofu's friend, she needed to concentrate on that. Heck, this was the first time she had interacted with Mikey as Ifrit too. She would be able to show both of Tofu's friends a good first impression as 'Ifrit'.

That had been the extent of her plan, and then… well, needless to say Tofu had not *at all* mentioned Nicole's special circumstances. Cindy had been dead certain she was witnessing a catastrophic mutation in action for a second there, and it had *frightened* her. Thank God the mask hid her face from Nicole at that moment, because she wasn't sure she could have dealt with the embarrassment if she reacted fearfully to a fellow mutant in that situation. Especially someone she was trying to impress.

Now she was sitting with everyone around a table eating meatloaf, and she had absolutely no clue what to say. The silence had stretched as they all began eating, and apparently Tofu had taken this as a cue that they needed drinks. He'd blurted something about getting some from the cafeteria, not even pausing long enough to ask what they wanted. Perhaps he was nervous too, because if he had asked, he might have noticed that what they all wanted was for him to stay and lead the conversation. Now they were all stuck in silent awkwardness together.

At least the meatloaf is good. Still...

"Meatloaf for brunch is kinda weird isn't it?" said Mikey suddenly. Cindy and Nicole both looked up from their food to find Mikey hesitantly grinning. "Like, I know I should expect odd stuff from Tofu by now, but for some reason eating meatloaf this early is the part that feels *weird* doesn't it?"

"...It kind of does yeah," replied Ifrit.

"I've kinda gotten used to it," offered Nicole with a small smile.

"Have you known Tofu a while then?" asked Mikey.

"Oh, no. I've only known him for about two weeks or so. I met him when he was being chased by a rat swarm."

"Oh! He told me about that! He said you helped him fight them off?"

"More like I saved him. He was being chased by forty of them into a dead end. It was lucky he ran past my tunnel," said Nicole. Then she realized what she said about her tunnel and almost clammed up, but Mikey glossed over the detail.

"Haha. I'll be sure to word it that way the next time he brings it up."

"Heh... so how long have you known Tofu?"

"Also about two, three weeks or so. I met him at school earlier that week, and then he introduced me to this job like right before he got chased, so I guess I've only known him a bit longer than you. How about you Ifrit? Have you known Tofu for a while?"

"Actually I only met him at the orientation," said Ifrit, as their attention turned to her. "He joined earlier that week I think. I've only been on three or so jobs with him so far."

"Huh, I guess we've all only known him for like two or three weeks then. Dang, I was kinda hoping you two could tell me more about him. There's actually a betting pool among some of the others on

where he's from."

Nicole let out a small laugh, "Is there really?"

"Oh yeah. Last I heard the pool had hit five thousand dollars," replied Mikey.

Nicole's jaw dropped, and even Ifrit had to do a double-take. There was always a betting pool or two going on (they worked in the mask business after all, there was plenty to bet on), but five thousand? Already? That was pretty impressive… and somewhat rude, betting on a fellow employee's secret identity. She might need to talk to Sandra about that later...

"Is that normal? That's a lot of money," said Nicole.

"I guess? But the pay is really good here so maybe it is?" said Mikey, "I've only been working for two weeks or so and I've almost paid for my entire first semester of college."

"But how can they afford… oh, right. Crime."

Ack!

Cindy could tell at a glance how Nicole felt about that.

"Heh, yeah it's quite a bit of that," said Mikey, somewhat shamefacedly. "But to be honest I've only really done one big job, and the rest of it has been legit stuff like moving boxes around."

"Really? Moving boxes," replied Nicole disbelievingly.

"Yeah, like, at warehouses? Although the job kinda changes up a lot. One time Gregor and I, another guy who works here, stood in for

some bouncers outside a club in the red zone. Another time I did some catering for a party at a casino, um, I delivered a few packages for some guy called the Mechanilizer, kind of a weird dude, and one of my first jobs I was setting up gizmos for Socket. That one I actually ran into Brick up close, dude is *intense* in person."

"...You get to work with gizmos?" asked Nicole, her face lighting up in interest.

"Well, more like set them up for Socket. I don't know how they work, I just get sent out with a box of them to set up every now and then."

"What for?"

"Uh, some kind of network, thing?"

"It's the masks," answered Ifrit, glad to have something she could chime in with. "You need a stable private network so they can communicate safely. Providing coverage can be a challenge, and even when it works it needs to be changed out every now and then for safety reasons. The pieces are scattered all over the sector."

"Oh, so it's an ad hoc network?"

"Um, maybe? Socket tends to switch things up a lot."

"Do you know if he's ever used directional lasers? Oh! Or one of those C.B. quantum entanglers that went on the market recently? I've heard those are nearly hack-proof. Do you know if he uses a BT cipher or a DT cipher? Wait, don't answer, that's probably a security no no right? OH! I bet he's used a sonic sender right?! Please tell me you've seen him use a sonic sender!"

Ifrit and Mikey were quickly overwhelmed by questions as Nicole got more and more excited over the gadgets and gizmos that might be only a room or two away from her. Cindy was just glad to have found something that might interest Nicole in working for HH. Nicole was actually really easy to talk to once the conversation got going, more so than a certain soy-based-product-name person that Cindy knew. The biggest problem seemed to be preventing Nicole from clamming

up after she realized she was gushing over a topic that Ifrit and Mikey had no real knowledge of.

“Sorry, I’m being weird,” said Nicole.

“Pfft, no you’re not,” said Mikey. Then he noticed someone entering the door to the rec room. “...And even if you were trying to be, you’ll never manage to out-weird Tofu.”

Nicole and Cindy both turned to look, and found that Tofu had returned with his arms full of various soda packets, canned teas, water bottles, a pitcher of ice water, a carton of powdered milk, a stack of styrofoam cups, and one full coffee pot. He had to use his power just to hold it all.

“You sure you got enough there Tofu?” asked Mikey rhetorically.

“I can go back for more if we need it."

“Er, Tofu, you really aren’t supposed to take that much,” said Cindy.

“No worries, I asked first. Nicole needs calories to regenerate,” and with that said, Tofu started opening and dumping soda packets into the pitcher of ice water. Before they realized they should stop him he’d already emptied thirty packets into the pitcher.

“Whoa, dude, that’s wayyy too many,” said Mikey

“No it’s not. She’ll need a lot more than this to finish regenerating.”

“Tofu, I don’t think I want to drink that,” ascertained Nicole.

“But it’s good for you.”

“Dude, if someone drank that no amount of exercise would save them

from diabetes," said Mikey.

"Which reminds me Mikey, you've been skipping combat practice. Adder has been asking."

"Ack!"

The group continued eating and talking, the awkwardness of earlier forgotten. Ifrit answered questions for Nicole on how Hellion's Henchmen worked as an organization and the benefits of the job, and Mikey provided a more… balanced viewpoint on what it was like to work as a minion than Tofu did. Then the discussion turned to less serious things like Gribblin Tamer, or Mikey daring everyone to try some of Tofu's soda concoction (it tasted terrible, way too sweet and the carbonation didn't come out right). It was almost a repeat of when she hung out with Mikey and Tofu at the mall. Less normal true, but this time she could talk about aspects of her life that included the cowls she grew up with, and it certainly didn't hurt that Nicole was a girl around her age that was also a mutant. It was nice having someone who could relate.

Socket

"Hey boss?"

"Zzz."

"Boss?"

"Zzz."

"BOSS!"

“Wha! Whut, what’s goin on?” answered Socket. He’d fallen asleep at one of his workbenches in the garage. A common occurrence.

“We’ve got reports of low water pressure in parts of the base.”

“Ugh, o’course we do. You check the pump yet?”

“Already done boss. The problem’s somewhere in the sewer.”

“Bah. Alrigh’, give me a minute and I’ll grab some boneheads to check it out.”

“Alright boss.”

Socket stood up and stretched, popping joints that had stiffened from a night spent sleeping hunched over a table. Truthfully he was a bit too old to still be pulling late nighters like this, but he hadn’t been able to sleep after yesterday’s excitement. HH’s top brass had been getting reports from Imp as he infiltrated the base with Tofu, and it wasn’t until they had confirmation that the rat-bastard was dead, and that the hostages were safe, that Socket had been able to relax enough to get some rest.

Whole thing’s been a lot o’ shite is what it’s been.

He cleared off his countertop, and started setting it straight for the day’s work ahead. A bunch of the widgets he’d made last night he threw into the scrap bin, most of it was crap anyways since he’d just been doing it to settle his nerves. If he could have he would have grabbed his wrench and a few of his gizmos and marched into that rat nest himself to bust a few skulls, fock his age, and *fock* his knees, but the situation had needed stealth to save the hostages.

What kind o' arsehole kidnaps… agh, fock it, it's done with.

He spat into the nearest trash can. This whole episode had left a rancid taste in his mouth. Half his crew had once been Tinker Tots, it was where HH recruited most of their mechanically inclined. Socket himself had been a Tinker Tot of sorts, although back then TT's hadn't been a thing, let alone a 'gang'. Back then they were called scrap rats, or junk hounds, or just bastards. They'd banded together now and then, partly for safety, partly because the tinker twitch demanded scratching, and it was easier to do when you had others to exchange ideas and parts with, but they'd never had each other's backs in the way the Tinker Tots or Hellion's Henchmen did.

E13 had been a mean place back then. Now it had real orphanages, and good hospitals, and a real hero team (even if they were a bit threadbare), and HH helped fund two out of three of those, while trying not to put too much of a strain on the third. That was the thing idiots didn't understand; it wasn't about money and profit, or fame and glory (even if those things were part of it). It was about working, sustainable systems. Hellion had known that, which was why a younger (but not young) Socket had thrown his lot in with the young spitfire. He'd never regretted it.

Socket finished up cleaning his workstation, then pulled out his phone to check the schedules. For most things he could just throw wrenches at his pit crew until problems got fixed, but if the problem was with the water main out in the sewer then he needed to pull a few boneheads in. Funnily enough, a bunch of eggheads with circuits for brains didn't fare too well with sewer beasties gnawing at their legs while they tried to repair a finicky gizmo.

Buncha wussies. Back in my day we had to wrestle rats taller than we were for our parts. Should send them out there without the boneheads. Put

some hair on their chests.

Then he became distracted by the priority message in his inbox. Brass only. It was a report of the results of last night's job with the rat-bastards, with a warning not to share with the regular employees. If Imp was sending it to lietenants only then it meant it was probably a bit too gruesome for the day to day workers. He opened it up and wasn't disappointed.

Ha, that'll show them bastards not to mess with… what's this then?

He read the message in the included picture. Then Imp's message. Then he looked at the picture again.

Then he started laughing his ass off.

"**HAHAHAHAHAHA**, he made- **AHAHAH**, he made a ***message*** outta him! **AHAHAHA**. Fockin' polite little ankle biter ain't he?! **AHAHAhaha** *__cough cough__* aha, ha."

Socket had to wave away the crew that came over to see what was up, claiming cowl business, but when he saw Viper come into the garage he had to share.

"Viper! Viper didja see this?" he asked, showing her his phone when he walked over to her.

"Ugh, yes I saw."

“Glimmer bolts that is brilliant right?”

“More like psychopathic. Could you stop waving it in my face please?”

“Bah, he ain’t no psycho, ain’t got the right look in his eye. You young folk just need to grow a thicker skin. Back in my day this would'a been a right laugh around the trash fire.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. Anyways, what brings you down here?”

“Gonna give Tofu’s friend the spiel. Sandra was up all night putting it together.”

“Good! We could use a few more like her. Girl’s got grit and a brain, *UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE I KNOW DAVY!*”

“*SUCK IT SOCKET!*”

“Bwahahaha. Anyways, just tell her I’ll let her use the fabricator if she signs up. That’ll save you some time.”

“I’ll try to mention it.”

“And send me a bonehead or two. Got a water jam in the sewer that needs fixing.”

“Yeah yeah.”

They parted ways, and Socket started shuffling through his schedule for the day, every now and then still chuckling about the politely worded message Tofu had carved out of the kidnapper.

Good crop of newbies this year.

Tofu

The lunch (or brunch as Mikey called it) went rather well I think. By the time Mikey and Ifrit had to leave for their jobs, Nicole had been speaking with the group comfortably, and the conversations had adopted the same patterns I observed at both the mall and at school. I'd had a decent amount of practice maneuvering through social situations, but I was glad that Mikey had been around to lead the conversation. I had yet to decipher *exactly* what was 'normal' to talk about in a group setting with friends, so letting someone else pick the topic and following along worked best. I still needed to work on laughter though. I never picked up on jokes at the right time, and I had long since learned that it was better to just smile or grin when others were laughing, rather than to follow up with fake laughter myself.

I was playing some Gribblin Tamer with Nicole, and trying to get her to drink more soda, when Viper walked into the rec room. She was carrying a folder in her hand, and approached our table.

"Hello there," Viper greeted Nicole, "My name is Viper. I'm here to inquire about a possible interest in joining Hellion's Henchmen?"

"Um, well, I'm not sure, I mean..."

Viper gave Nicole a friendly smile (I didn't know she could make that expression). "I know, Viper isn't exactly the name you want to hear from a recruiter, is it. Normally Sandra is the one doing these interviews but I'm standing in for her today. Later on I can introduce myself for real, but we like to stick to our codenames while in mask. I'm sure you can understand."

“Oh! Right, of course. Er, my name’s Nicole.” She stuck her hand out for a handshake, but Viper merely wiggled her fingers to display the claws (that would make handshakes difficult). Nicole pulled her hand back, embarrassed, and Viper took a seat at the table.

“I have with me here some preliminary papers and our standard package to go over with you Nicole. Tofu, we’ll need some privacy for this. Socket needs a powered minion for a bit anyways, could you check in with him?”

“Viper are you alright? You’re talking strangely.”

“...Just get going twerp.”

Oh good, she was fine. I was almost suspicious for a second there.

“Um, actually,” interrupted Nicole, “Could Tofu stay? To go over the options with me?”

Viper raised an eyebrow, “If you want. It’s your privacy. Now, I assume you’re over eighteen?”

“Er, yes, nineteen.”

Viper gave Nicole a similar explanation to the one that Sandra gave me, including the warnings about working as a minion. I was glad I had stayed, as the warnings almost made Nicole decline the job, and I needed to help assure her that she faced more dangerous conditions in the tunnels every day. Frankly the most dangerous part of the job was encountering hostile villains, and unless something went horribly wrong she would never be in close proximity to them.

Viper skipped a lot of the questions that Sandra asked me (likely because she couldn't confirm the answers without Sandra's power), but did have Nicole look through the papers that needed signing. Unfortunately, I wasn't as useful to Nicole as I would have liked to be for this part of the interview. During my own interview I hadn't known how to read, and had basically just signed on the dotted line wherever Sandra told me to. But, I was able to help when it came to the special accommodations that Nicole would need. Viper brought up the possibility of an apartment, and Nicole had needed to admit that she wouldn't be able to use one.

"Won't be able to use… what do you mean?" asked Viper

"Er, well, you see…"

"Nicole won't fit into the apartment buildings, or the elevators for that matter," I supplied.

"What? Why?" asked Viper, confused. "We have handicap accessible apartments."

"I-I, um, it's my mutation. It's… oh jeez."

Nicole had trouble talking about the full extent of her mutation with a stranger, so I helped explain to Viper the dimensions we were dealing with. Easily done since I had a total measurement of Nicole's size and weight. Viper assured Nicole that they would figure something out.

As for myself I couldn't stay any longer. One of the pipes in one of the bathrooms had burst, which meant Socket's problem had been bumped up in priority, and he needed my help with it.

Something about a clog in the sewers?

Viper

Even with all of Sandra's prep work, Nicole's interview was still a doozy to get through, but Lily was determined to make hiring Nicole work. Lily had known the details of Nicole's mutation ahead of time of course, thanks to the incident report Sandra had found, but she couldn't well admit that to the person in question, so she had needed to go through the song and dance to get to the point where she could discuss accommodating Nicole. The hardest part of the interview had been stopping Tofu from jamming things up whenever he embarrassed the poor girl.

I don't care how close they are, no guy should ever know your weight in such detail.

Once the twerp was sent off and out of her hair, Lily had a much easier time keeping the interview going. As it was, Nicole was far more mature and level-headed than most teens that walked through HH's door, and despite the (frankly massive) steps HH would need to take to accommodate her, Nicole wasn't even half the headache Tofu or Tedic were. Lily found she actually somewhat enjoyed talking to her, especially since she turned out to also be quite tech savvy, and knew all the latest internet happenings. Girl had lived in a damned *sewer* and still kept up with current tech trends; she could see why Socket wanted Nicole on his crew.

"Um, thank you for doing all of this for me," said Nicole, gesturing at the spread of papers on the table.

“No prob.”

“It’s just so much stuff…”

“Hey, seriously, don’t worry about it. HH has never turned someone away just for being a mutant, and we aren’t starting today.”

Lily started to gather up the papers, in a surprisingly good mood. She could kinda get why Sandra loved this part of the job. If anyone could use a break it was Nicole, and it felt nice to help with that. Maybe she would consider doing more interviews in the future...

“Hey Nicole, look who I found!”

Tofu’s voice rang out in the open rec room like the clarion call of a dark harbinger, and was quickly followed by a terrible squealing noise that Lily couldn’t place. She turned to witness Tofu dragging what must have been the ugliest, grossest, most terrifying nightmare beast Lily had ever seen through the door. It seemed Nicole had a different opinion about it though.

“MR. CHONKERS!”

*Kids **and** pets...wonderful.*

Ch42 Sweet, Salty, Sour

I was worried for a bit there. When I discovered the herd of nessies clogging the outflow, I was glad to find that Nicole's favorite, Mr. Chonkers, was among them. I figured the return of her 'pet' would make her happy, but instead she started crying when I brought him to her. I thought I had erred somehow, but she assured me that she was actually very happy. So… I guess humans can cry when happy? I thought crying was for being sad.

Humans are complicated.

Regardless, the other minions were not nearly as enthusiastic about the discovery of the nessies in the tunnels around their base. Especially not Viper. Both Nicole and I tried to assure them that the nessies were harmless, but unfortunately the fact that nessies are a bit... 'bitey', did little to convince them. It had never been a problem for Nicole and I, but it seemed the average human wasn't quite as prepared to dodge a nessie lunge, and admittedly the nessies weren't all *that* weak, at least not in comparison to a standard human (they did compete with rats after all), so both Nicole and I had to bonk Mr. Chonkers multiple times to prevent him from biting nearby minions. Nicole eventually fed him some leftover meatloaf in order to pacify him.

I did bring up the nessies' useful filtration ability, but besides a few of Socket's engineers there wasn't much interest. Water filtration was a technology humans already had, and HH just used the city's water supply anyways. My suggestion that the nessies could provide recycled water directly from the sewer was perhaps met with even less enthusiasm than letting the nessies stay. I wasn't sure what the big deal was, I'd tested it myself, and nessie treated water should be

just as safe for humans as tap water, and yet even Nicole wasn't in agreement with me.

In the end, the final decision came down to the concern that nessies were not a recognized 'stable species' or even a recognized species at all, and the risk that they could trigger badly due to Odd Summer was too high. On the plus side, one minion's suggestion that they be 'put down' was also disregarded for the same reason. That or Nicole's obvious distress at the suggestion. Socket smacked the back of that minion's head.

Still, the nessies couldn't stay, so I was put in charge of luring them away from the base tunnels with food, while Socket's crew welded grates over the outflow and some connecting tunnels. I was trying to figure out a good place to bring them, when Mr. Chonkers got distracted and went down a side tunnel away from the herd. He had apparently found a small patch of half-dead barnacles, and almost got himself killed when they started whalloping him, forcing me to save him. The chamber the barnacles were in was a good place to store the nessies though. A wide pool with multiple smaller entrance/escape tunnels, and a good water flow. I dumped the rest of my bait and the dead barnacles (keeping one for myself). The nessies would figure it out. Or I'd have to dump some food here every now and then to keep them from wandering off and dying. At least they were easy to feed.

The rest of the day was a calm one. I had no official duties, so I spent the day helping Nicole acquire essentials she would need, seeing as the zombies had torn up her home, and the C's would still have eyes on the scene after all the commotion. Things like toothpaste, a charger cable for her phone, and clothes. I asked her what kind of clothes she wanted, and she replied with "just some generic shirts" which I could get cheap at a surplus store since "whatever" was fine. Unacceptable. Clothes were vitally important, as wearing the wrong ones could cause problems. Wear the wrong colors down the wrong

alley? You'll get stopped by whichever gang controls the area. Go to a 'fancy' restaurant without 'fancy' clothes? They'll stare at you throughout the whole meal. Get in a fight while not wearing durable clothing? You'll have to get new ones. Nicole had absolutely nothing but the one shirt right now, so every piece counted.

That said, I wasn't quite sure what would be most useful to her. Most of my wardrobe was based on what was sturdy enough to survive a quick brawl, items that fit a certain 'look' based on average crowd aggregates, a few pieces I might need later for alternate disguises, and a few articles that Babs, the tailor Cindy introduced me to, designed specifically because I was the only one who could wear them.

Ah! I could just ask Babs. She would definitely know better than I what Nicole would need.

I took a detour to Babs' tailor shop on my way back to the base. When I entered, Babs was immediately apparent, wearing a bright red asymmetrical dress and speaking loudly to a client in the shop.

"I'll have some of the outfits ready by tomorrow," said Babs. "Be sure to send my regards, and I'd be happy to have them in the shop for a real fitting whenever they have the time."

"I'll mention it, but I doubt it. Summer's ramping up."

"My, yes. I saw all of that nastiness on the news this morning. Thank heavens they found those poor people. You take care now darling."

"You as well ma'am."

The client left, giving a perfunctory nod as he passed by me on the way out. He was a baseline human wearing a suit, slightly wrinkled.

With the dark blotches under his eyes, and the slight scent of sweat I detected from him, I determined he had likely been working at whatever his job was for quite a while. The door drifted shut behind him as Babs greeted me.

“Tofu! Welcome, welcome. Good things do come in twos.”

“They do?”

“Today at least. Just managed to nab a juicy contract. *Please* tell me you’re here to model.”

“Actually I’m here to get clothes for a friend. She lost everything during a rat attack.”

“My goodness! It wasn’t that business on the news this morning was it?”

“If you mean the rat swarms it was. One of the swarms came after her.”

“My word! Tell me everything!”

I gave Babs a basic summary of what happened, and an explanation that I was helping with restocking Nicole’s wardrobe but didn’t know what to get her. Babs immediately agreed to help me, and once I explained why Nicole’s mutation meant she wouldn’t need pants, demanded I model for her to get it right. It took an hour and a half before Babs was satisfied, but once it was done, she had several articles of clothing that she claimed would match Nicole’s ‘complexion’. Interestingly they weren’t all shirts, and included several blouses and dresses, as well as some custom articles by Babs. Nicole hadn’t asked for them, but Babs assured me they were essential, along with several articles of ‘underwear’. I took note of every new thing Babs mentioned about clothing as usual. Clothing was important for my disguise, and every bit I could glean would help me in the long run.

In the end I left Babs' shop with my arms laden with boxes and bags of clothes, all sold to me at a heavy discount (which I had come to learn wasn't really something Babs's shop normally did). I would come back at a later date to retrieve the more specialized clothing that Babs was going to make for Nicole, such as gloves and work aprons.

The walk home was uneventful. I flashed my mask at any thugs that looked at my bags with interest, noted two flaming motorcycles that were racing each other down the road, and bought myself some snacks from a street vendor to eat while I walked. When I got to my apartment, I dropped off a few articles of clothing I had bought for myself, then took the elevator to the base to give Nicole her supplies and clothing. She was somewhat surprised by the amount I brought back.

"Tofu I, I can't pay for all of these."

"I already paid for them."

"But these look so expensive! I just needed a few shirts."

"Babs gave me a discount. No worries, I've been budgeting properly." I was obeying Sandra's advice, and I was getting a big hazard pay bonus for helping with the rat-stitcher besides. "Anyways, Babs said your work stuff will be ready in a day or two, and when you finish regenerating you should come by to get fitted."

She rolled her eyes, "Like that's going to happen."

"You should. She said she can't perfectly fit the underwear otherwise."

"W-what?"

"The underwear, here," I pulled out a bundle of 'bras' from a bag and

handed them to her. “These should fit regardless, but they’ll fit better if Babs gets your measurements. I did my best to model you for her with my power, but I can only mimic so much.”

“You… modeled me?”

“Yes, but it’s imprecise of course. If you let me take your measurements I could go to Babs myself if you’d prefer that? Babs showed me how to do it.”

“…”

“Nicole? Are you alright? Your face is changing hues.”

I got kicked out.

For the rest of the afternoon I used both the target range and the training room to continue making adjustments and practice with my new body. Partly because I needed to practice with the lower weight, partly because I was… slightly exasperated with human social interactions, and I had had enough of them for the day.

So many illogical rules.

Perfectly fine filtered water was still ‘gross’ if it had once been in contact with someone else’s digestive system. Even if it was cleaner than the average tap water. Talking about bras was embarrassing, but only if it was a boy and a girl talking about them, but also *not* when it was with the shop owner who was selling them to you. Certain emotions could invoke the same physical reactions, but not always, and for unclear reasons. The stun batons were a *joke*, because the

threat of physical harm among acquaintances is somehow *funny*. But superficially slashing a thug's face when they doubt your mask is real is considered "too much," and then *they* call *you* a psycho! And putting more than one Nectar packet in my drink? Also too much. Despite the fact that it's specifically formulated for mutants who generally need the extra calories. Says so on the label. At least Nicole admitted that my drink wasn't that bad after the others left. She hadn't done so earlier because while Mikey and Ifrit were there it was difficult to admit she liked it, because of 'peer pressure', which was *another* social concept I had to research… she did apologize for that though…

And mask rules in Fortress City made no logical sense! I'd read through the articles on the mask rules myself after Viper talked through some of the special circumstances with Nicole. There were no less than *nine* logical paradoxes within the first *four sections* alone. Out of one-hundred and twenty-eight Articles total. Not including the amendments sections. Ridiculous.

And humanity's obsession with rectangles was apparently so ingrained that they didn't have a word I could look up to research it. That… hadn't actually come up today, but it was still bothering me, and I just felt so… ***frustrated.***

> Human.exe shut-down;
>
> Human.exe displaying anomalous thought patterns: analyzing...
>
> Modifying thought process kernel...
>
> Restarting Human.exe;

I rolled my eyes as my error counter ticked up by one, and decided to shove the social interaction analysis further down the priority queue. Instead I concentrated on the physical destruction of my target dummies. Several anger management guides recommended physical

activity to manage stress and irritation, and I had to admit that hitting and breaking the targets was… ‘cathartic’.

A few hours passed this way, with my only social interactions being with a few of the other minions that came in for their own practice, but they were focused on their own training as well, so it wasn’t a bother. They filtered in and out throughout the afternoon, and eventually I was alone again. Finally though, I was interrupted by Mikey, who had finished his job for the day.

“Hey Tofu, there you are. Want to go get dinner?”

“Um, I might eat later Mikey, I still have a lot to do before I stop for the day.”

“Oh, you sure? They’re doing that big dinner thing you were talking about.”

“…What?”

“For the Trebla job? Plus the kidnapping thing being dealt with. Sandra and Viper aren’t here, so Hellion is managing it herself, said something about making it twice as big?...She seemed kinda drunk already though.”

“…!”

I had to carry Mikey since he couldn’t keep up with me. Ifrit was already there, as well as Nicole surprisingly. She was wearing a black domino mask and one of her new dresses, which she thanked me for getting.

I ate a triple portion for dinner.

It was good.

Jerry, E13's Central Liaison

It was the end of a long and tiresome morning, and Jerry was trying to enjoy a cucumber sandwich. Trying being the keyword. His aides kept coming into his office to drop off reports, or inform him of changing situations across E13. He was reading the headers and organizing them according to priority with one hand, while he held his sandwich with the other and tried to keep the protein spread from leaking out onto the documents. Jerry had to admit though, overall, the general situation was actually pretty good.

The morning had started off with a bang when someone called in a disturbance near the highschool. Magenta was called in for it, standard procedure with anything involving a school, even an empty one. You wouldn't be surprised at how many times a former student triggered and decided to test their power by trashing the empty building, or at least, the hopefully empty building. Schools were simply breeding grounds for power awakenings; the combination of youthful energy, childhood uncertainty, and teenage angst made it inevitable. It was the reason why all schools had a second nearby location to temporarily hold supers, either to debrief them on their new responsibilities now that they had a power, or to restrain them in the case of violent or criminal behavior… or a bad trigger. Not exactly the nicest thought that each school had holding cells right next door, so they were often disguised and their exact location kept secret from the general populace.

Which was why the small crowd emerging from the facility next to E13's biggest highschool was somewhat of a problem. The song-and-dance Jerry had to put on as a result was probably some of his best work. Secret Central holding facility that was co-opted by a villain? Nope, random nearby building. Hostages rescued by masked thugs? Nope, Magenta was first at the scene, obviously she had a hand in it. High school teacher gone insane and performing horrific experiments on civilians? Nope, just a pack of rats that were mutated and warped by Odd Summer. It had been a hard sell, but luckily Jerry had help on the public relations side from their new PR guy. Despite what Brick thought of their new resident spin-doctor, the man was a miracle worker.

That left Central and a few others who needed mollifying. Central had not been pleased to learn that one of their facilities had been co-opted and subsequently cleaned out. The guy talking to Jerry had tried to imply incompetence on E13's side of things, whereupon Jerry had beaten him with facts until he submitted. E13's hero team was under-staffed with only three members, in a sector that was large enough to warrant seven or eight (and despite multiple requests for new members before summer started, mind you). Two of the people the team did have were new recruits from the last Odd Summer, a summer which had also claimed the life of the previous team leader and thrown the team under new leadership, and despite all that they were still holding things together. The rat-swarm problem was solved and done with, without Central's name being trawled through the mud, and with great PR for the heroes they employed. Oh and by the way, where was that medical super that should have been by a week ago to deal with Turbo's injured leg? Mighty bad PR when Odd Summer opens with an injured Hero and two down-and-out sidekicks wouldn't you say?

That conversation had ended with Jerry almost in a screaming fit, but that was only a show. On the inside he was pleased as a rat with cheese. The medical super would be stopping by tomorrow to fix up all of E13's capes, and *of course* there would be new members sent E13's way. Not sidekicks either, why, it just so happened the man

had a potential recruit ready to go. A new trigger true, and not an espionage type that Brick wanted, but the man was apparently a *Panama vet,* discharged with honors after a voluntary term of duty. No one came out of that hell-hole without being tough as nails, and Jerry had needed to restrain himself from performing an unbecoming jig right in his office.

Of course, that left Jerry's own hero team as the last group of people that needed to be reassured. Not so much Turbo, he was just glad he didn't need to go tromping through a sewer. Brick and Magenta on the other hand were rattled. Magenta because she was basically being forced to lie and accept credit for an important case she hadn't been much a part of, one where a lot of people had died. Jerry thought she was just being too hard on herself since the incident with the shifter, which had seen a lot of public backlash flung her way. Ever since Odd Summer started, she'd been beating up monsters and booking criminals left, right, and center. She was the only person on the team who was both mobile and a tank, and she had a large sector to cover. Even if she felt guilty for taking the credit on this one, she honestly deserved more credit overall for the work she'd been putting in, and this case did a lot to quiet the angry voices on top of that.

Brick though… Brick was fuming, and Jerry couldn't much blame him. On one hand, the hostages had been rescued, which was the important part. But on the other hand, the perpetrator had been killed himself by another killer. Brick didn't see it as a deserved comeuppance, as some might. He just saw a crime on top of a crime, neither of which he'd been able to prevent. The gruesome, and quite frankly mocking, message that had been made of the rat man didn't help at all either. It basically openly stated that E13 was Hellion's, and this was her 'justice'. It mocked what Brick believed in, and challenged the authority of the laws he worked to protect. In response, Brick had scowled, gritted his teeth, and gone on patrol again without a word to anyone.

Jerry sighed. *Kandor would have rolled with the punches.*

It wasn't fair to compare them, but it was the truth. Kandor had been flexible where it was needed, and decisive when it was necessary, whereas Brick faced these situations with the inflexibility of his namesake. Where Brick would skip another break to go out on patrol again, in the hope of stopping even one more crime, Kandor would have skipped another break to meet with the victims' families and mourn with them. Similar hearts, different minds. They were both good leaders, but Jerry worried that the job would chip away at someone as rigid as Brick.

Well, hopefully this case being over with takes some of the pressure off.

Jerry finished his sandwich and got back to the paperwork. He was almost halfway through when his phone rang. Checking the caller ID, he saw that it was the aide he had sent out on one of the more trivial tasks that nevertheless needed to get done. He really hoped there hadn't been any complications, because regardless of what kind of hero Brick was, he couldn't lead the team in his skivvies.

"Hey Davidson," answered Jerry, "Please tell me there wasn't an issue with the outfits."

"What? No, they'll have the order ready in- Wait, that's not what I'm calling about. While I was there another customer came in. The owner referred to him as Tofu. Wasn't that one of the guys from that batch of minions that went through E12?"

"Um, yeah. Yeah it was, can you describe him?" answered Jerry, already scrambling for the report in question.

"Seemed like a normal enough kid. Couldn't really place his ethnicity. About five ten, brownish eyes, kinda mousy brown hair? "

"... Do I need to get you glasses Davidson?"

“The kid had a forgettable face Jerry! Like, almost too forgettable? Like someone picked the most average features they could out of a bin. I know that’s not a lot to go on, but I’ve never heard of someone called Tofu before and now I’ve heard the name twice, and at a clothing store that deals with special body types to boot.”

“Well we know Tofu is the name of Hellion’s new shifter, so it would make sense if the guy changes his face in public. Hell, it might be him. Seems kind of odd that he wouldn't change his name though, unless he's just that cocky he won't be caught.”

“You want me to follow him when he leaves? See if I can get more than just a face on him?”

Jerry’s heart stopped, “…Are you still inside the store?”

“No, I heard his name as I was leaving. Didn’t have an opportunity to turn around without looking suspicious. He’s still inside.”

Jerry’s heart restarted. He let out a huff before answering, “Davidson, I want you to get back to your car. Don’t run, don’t hang up.”

“Jerry? What’s wrong?”

“Davidson, you just offered to follow someone who might have a power, who is likely a member of Hellion’s Henchmen. **Alone**,” *and with no proof that it wasn’t you who was followed*.

“…I’m heading to my car now.”

“And stay where security cams might see you.”

Davidson made it back to his car fine, and he left his phone on in the passenger seat as he pulled away. Most likely the both of them were just being paranoid, but it was better that than dead. Jerry had been in this business too long to not listen to his gut.

He pulled out the picture of what remained of the unlucky highschool teacher. The thing about this picture, the part of it all that rattled *Jerry*, was that he didn't recognize this MO. He'd been working in E13 for quite a few years now, and he'd grown familiar with many of the cowls who called it home. For example, if it had been Imp that killed the rat man, the body would likely have bullet wounds from impossible angles. If Hellion had done it herself, there'd only be a pile of ash. If it was some of the non-powered HH boneheads the body would be pulped, but there would still be a body. This? This was new and precise and pants-shittingly terrifying, and yet Hellion's Henchmen had apparently hired the culprit anyway, and he knew enough about HH to know that they didn't hire uncontrollable psychopaths.

He opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out a flask before taking a sip. Then he got to work putting together a detail to stake out the boutique store. Even if he was completely off base with his guesses, a store that sold merchandise aimed at mutants wasn't a bad place to start looking for boneheads. He was taking Brick's plan to start sniffing around seriously, but he also hoped Brick understood what he was in for. When Brick gave his little speech about playing dirty, it gave a wonderful example of how Brick saw the world. To Brick, leaning into the law to get it to work for you was playing dirty. But to the villains?...

He looked at the picture of the message written in blood and body parts.

...To the villains mucking around with the law was just them playing *nice*.

He took another sip from his flask.

Then again, Brick's idea of playing nice is a straightforward fist to the face.

And he had really big fists.

A note from Gogglesbear

And user fatbaldbastard made some hyper-realistic artwork of the story's cover.

Spoiler:

I love when you all send me arts. Moar pls.

Ch43 I Can't Believe It's Not Tofu

I like parties. There is food, sometimes games, and it's easy to fade into the background and just observe. Social interaction is a lot easier to study when you don't have to be a part of it.

The party went similarly to the last one HH hosted, but much more informal since there weren't any potential clients to impress. Basically that meant there was a lot more alcohol consumption. Also no kobe beef, as it had all been either sold or consumed, but there was still meat to choose from, as well as several food items that were difficult to get in summer. Mainly fresh fruits or vegetables that were hard to produce during Odd Summer for one reason or another. I was right in my guess that fruits attracted organisms; even if fruit could be 'farmed' during Odd Summer, there were still difficulties with successfully 'harvesting' it. I found the concept of 'food production' fascinating, and once Odd Summer was over, I hoped to visit one of these 'farms'. I knew that Hive City was rather far away, but supposedly the northern sectors of Fortress City had some indoor farms.

Food you could 'grow' without killing or buying. Such a fascinating concept.

I sat with my friends, and introduced Nicole to some of the minions who worked at HH, but otherwise we mainly focused on eating. Nicole because she had to regenerate (and was shy), and me because I wanted to sample more unique foods. We left carrying the conversation to Mikey and Ifrit.

As the party wore on, more of the 'night shift' minions joined, and the day shift minions slowly filtered out to go home. It was

interesting to see the changes this caused to the party as it happened. There was less eating, more drinking, and the conversation and party activities became rowdier. You could literally see the change as it happened, since many more of the night shift minions were boneheads and their helmets stood out. One drunken minion challenged me to arm wrestling and subsequently lost, which prompted multiple rounds of different physical tests like “who can drink the most without collapsing” or “who can jab the knife between their finger appendages the fastest without maiming themselves” (normally Sandra would have been around to stop us from doing that one). Standard party games really.

After a few hours Mikey and Ifrit left, uninterested in the drinking or potentially dangerous games, and Nicole left soon after because she was “full,” an oddly obvious lie. Her regeneration was progressingly swiftly, and at its current rate I doubted she could out-eat her body’s ability to spend the calories. Why, you only had to look at her tail, where the next leg section was nearly ready to unfurl…

Ah! Maybe that was why. She had been very embarrassed when Mikey and Ifrit saw her legs grow in. Nicole became embarrassed over the oddest things. I’d have to help her overcome that mental weakness, lest it result in another critical situation like when she froze up against the ‘stitch zombies’. Hmm… well, maybe I would put that on hold. As today had already established, I was nowhere near experienced enough to handle even my own social maneuvering, let alone someone else's psychological problems. The fact that she was letting others even see her was progress enough for now. More importantly was getting Mikey to training sessions, as he was physically the weakest of my friends who worked at HH. Immediate combat performance first, group protocols second.

I was finishing my third portion of food, and considering leaving to see if Nicole was still up, when a minion I hadn’t talked to before

walked over to me and spoke.

“Hey kid, boss wants a word with you,” he said.

I glanced at the table he was gesturing to. Hellion sat with a group of minions, mostly boneheads, few of which I had spoken to in my time at HH. Sandra had said that minions were grouped into teams according to who worked best together, but those groupings were by no means set in stone. The jobs I had been on involved minions from multiple teams, and Mikey frequently worked with members from teams two through five.

But the minions around Hellion were a different story. If the ‘gossip’ I got from other coworkers was correct, the minions sitting at the tables around Hellion were almost exclusively team one, and they rarely worked with the other minions unless they needed someone with a specific skill set, which they rarely did. The fact that quite a few of the boneheads weren’t mutants suggested that several powered individuals were hidden among them. These were the professionals that worked for Hellion directly, or with clients who were considered… volatile. Right now they were celebrating a job in E8 that they had just gotten back from, so in essence this party was actually for the successful completion of three jobs.

I followed the minion over to a small table in the center of the group, where Hellion sat alone. Close enough to the surrounding tables to talk comfortably, but far enough that the small embers and tongues of flame that every so often sparked off of her wouldn’t catch on anyone. Right now though, there was very little fire emanating from her.

But I could still feel the radiating heat. It was like standing next to a human-sized heating coil.

Hellion's horned helmet was off and placed to the side so she could eat and drink. She took a long pull from her beer as I arrived, and gestured with her other hand for me to sit across from her. I sat hesitantly.

She finished her sip and spoke, "Ha, don't look so spooked. Here, have a beer. Just don't tell Sandra." She pulled another bottle from a cooler at her feet and slid it across the table. I had to catch it before it slid off the edge. "I don't think we've been formally introduced. It's Tofu right?"

"Yes."

"Hellion, but I'll assume you knew that… Anyways, I called you over to thank you for your work last night, and apologize for having you do something like that. Shouldn't have to rely on a teenager for the really dangerous stuff, but it was a uniquely complicated situation, and without you running point for Imp we wouldn't have been able to act effectively."

"No worries. It wasn't difficult."

She grimaced at my response. Apparently it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"Right, Imp mentioned your… upbringing. I guess…" she stopped talking, and glared at a few of the surrounding minions who had been listening in. They hurriedly returned to their own conversations, and she continued with a lowered voice, "I guess you've had practice with this type of thing." She took another sip of beer, then suddenly asked, "Want me to burn them to the ground?"

"…Huh?"

"Whoever treated you like a lab rat. Want revenge?"

I paused to consider. It was an interesting offer, and definitely tempting, but New Dawn Inc. wasn't a faction I wanted to deal with if I could avoid it. If my research was correct, they were a weapons producer that operated at a 'nationwide' level. Fortress City was already large, and New Dawn Inc. operated in multiple cities; therefore, they must be a massive faction. There wasn't much value in antagonizing them, and while I wouldn't say this to Hellion, I wasn't completely sure HH could go up against them in the long run. Blowing up the lab I was made in sure, but a protracted engagement? No. Too risky, and definitely wasteful. As far as I knew, they thought I was dead, and I'd like to keep it that way.

"No. As far as they should know, I'm dead, so I'd rather just forget about it."

"Tch, that's too bad, I could use the stress relief. Just to make sure though, there weren't any other kids in there with you were there?"

"Not that I know of. Besides the scientists, the only other living things I saw were the animals they made me fight."

"Hmph, fine. If you're done with it you're done with it," she said, then finished off the rest of her beer. "It's been a rough couple of days for youngsters, hasn't it? You, your friend, the Tots… It's amazing really. You legalize all the big vices; drugs, prostitution, gambling, and yet some people still try to find the new line you drew in the sand and cross it. What about 'don't traffic people' is so hard to understand? How is '*don't target kids*' so goddamn hard to understand? Those stupid zombies even went after ***my own daughter!*** And the ***fucker*** took kids hostage, so I couldn't even go in and ***burn him to slag myself!"***

The beer bottle in her hand melted suddenly, the last dregs of beer boiling away as the melted glass ran through her armored fingers.

“Ah damnit,” she stuck her armored hand in the cooler next to her, then flexed her fingers to break the cooling glass off. She took a few slow, deep breaths, before pulling a new beer out of the cooler and popping the cap off. The minions around us eyed their boss warily, but otherwise ignored the outburst.

“Sorry about that, it’s been a stressful few days.”

“Understandable,” and mildly terrifying.

“Mhm. Have to admit, you kids are taking all of this crap better than I am. Especially you.”

“I’m adaptable.”

“Pfft, no kidding… and your friend? How’s she doing? I noticed she left early.”

“I think she is doing well. Nicole regenerates quickly, and she seemed excited about getting to work with Socket’s team.”

“Good, I’m hoping she sticks around. It’s nice seeing my girl with friends her own age.”

“Nicole is a year older.”

Hellion rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean… or wait, maybe you don’t. I’m guessing a lot of things go over your head huh?”

“...If you mean metaphors, then yes.”

“Eh, you’ll pick it all up eventually. You wouldn’t be the first that needs some catching up after being pulled out of a lair. Heck, Sandra will probably try to sign you up for sensitivity training or something once she realizes all the school you’ve missed.”

“Sensitivity training?”

“It’s like, um, classes for etiquette. Oh, and classes are where you go to learn basic stuff.”

I nodded, “I snuck into Mikey’s school for a week. If it’s like that I would very much like sensitivity training.”

“Ha, you really have been living under a rock then. Listen, there’s only three rules a kid like you really needs to know. One: you follow my rules. Two: keep your mask on when you’re working. Three: stay out of my daughter’s pants. Think you can handle all that?”

“Yes. I already knew the first two rules, and Nicole warned me about that last one.” You weren’t supposed to copy friends and wear their clothes. Nicole was very specific about it.

Hellion laughed, “I like her already. Alright, I think that's enough talk for tonight. I’ve got a lot more alcohol to consume, and you’ve got socializing to catch up on. Go make more friends or something, shoo, shoo.” She waved me away, and I got up to leave.

“Oh wait, Tofu, one last thing,” she said suddenly. I turned back to her.

“Welcome to Fortress City.”

As far as I can tell, my disguise is secure.

My ability to shapeshift can be explained away as having a power. My lack of common knowledge can be explained by my ‘upbringing’ in a villain’s lair, and inconsistencies in my behavior are excused by the erroneous belief that I have been ‘traumatised’ by that same

upbringing.

Even better, there are apparently countless cases of super villains creating new organisms in their lairs. Most of these are of the bio-weapon variety like myself of course, but enough of them involve human experimentation that my claim of being a human youth has gone undisputed. The fact that the humans came to this conclusion on their own merely cements the 'fact' that I am human in their minds.

So, for the first time in a long time, all the major threats to my continued operation are checked by acceptable countermeasures. Which means for the most part I'm… safe? Well, minus whatever random events can happen due to Odd Summer, but for the most part the odds of my survival have reached an equilibrium with the possible threats. It's a strange feeling. I wonder if this is how humans feel most of the time?

Regardless, it means I can now more freely focus on less pressing pursuits. Like Gribblin Tamer, and cooking, and making sure Nicole assimilates into HH without problems. Which was why I was currently on my way to Babs' store to pick up the rest of Nicole's work clothes. Nicole was quite eager to get her hands on the equipment in Socket's garage, and had been talking about the different devices she recognized all morning. Once I was done picking up her work clothes, she'd promised to go through some of the manuals Socket provided her with me.

I had a nice, relaxing walk to Babs' store. Then I modeled a few items for Babs, since she was providing Nicole's clothes at such a discount. I wasn't able to test some of the fittings on Nicole's items, since she had forbidden me from doing so, but I was happy to find that Babs and I both agreed she was just being 'silly' about the restriction. It

was nice to know I wasn't alone in thinking this was an illogical rule.

Still. Hellion had warned me against it as well, so I was going to follow her rules, or else.

Possible consequence for breaking: Barbeque.

__Shudder__

I thanked Babs and left with my parcels, but immediately noticed a potential problem. Across the street, and half a block down, was a parked car with two men in it. Not that unusual, but I had noted them on my way into Babs' shop, and on my way out I saw one of them use a cellphone to take a picture of me (my new eye modifications made bystander tracking so wonderfully easy). I left, expecting them to follow and try to mug me for my parcels, but they didn't. They just stayed in their parked car.

Curious.

Once out of sight, I ducked into an alley to consider the situation. Normally when random human males showed such an interest in me, it wasn't for any benign reason. In my case it was normally because of something I was carrying, or because my disguise didn't match the 'gang colors' of the local faction. We were too close to Ashwood St. for it to be a minor gang causing trouble, and they hadn't chased me for my parcels despite showing interest. They had also been waiting there for quite a while now... maybe they were planning on robbing Babs store? If that was the case I would need to intervene.

First I needed a better spot to observe from. Babs' store was on the ground floor, but being so close to Ashwood St, the surrounding buildings had many walkways to help reach the upper levels. The building her store was in sat in a sort of blindspot in said walkways, which allowed sunlight to easily hit the ground floor around the building (it "nicely drew the eye," Babs claimed it was good for advertisement). I made my way to the next level up while avoiding the line of sight of the two men in the car. Then I picked a discreet spot to observe for a while.

An hour passed as I watched them. They stayed parked the entire time. They also ignored most of the pedestrian traffic that wandered by, only taking pictures of anyone who enters Babs' shop. Definitely suspicious.

I wasn't sure what to make of this. All they were doing was taking pictures, which wasn't harmful in and of itself, but that level of interest specifically in the customers of Babs' shop couldn't be a good thing. Most of her customers were mutants, and if one thing had been made apparent to me, it was that attention directed at mutants was rarely altruistically intentioned. I didn't need another group of people targeting mutants right now. Hellion was already stressed from so many factions targeting mutants while her daughter was working as a minion. Another one so soon might be bad.

So, how to handle this?

I could kill them. I was reasonably certain that I could kill them before they even knew I was there; however, that was contingent on neither of them having a power. Plus, even if they were just normal humans, there were still possible repercussions. I didn't know what

factions these two might be aligned with.

I could continue to observe them until I understood what they were doing, but I didn't want to be here all day... hmm.

...I needed to ask someone else what to do.

__Ring ring ring__

Sunlight hit Sandra's eyes, and she flinched in pain. Somewhere else in the room, Lily groaned, and grumbled about turning off the alarm, but Sandra recognized her ringtone. She automatically reached for her pocket, but her phone wasn't there, so she was forced to open her eyes to search the room. Her head screamed at the injustice of it.

Just how much did I drink last night?

The two of them had gone out last night and met up with some of their civilian friends who they hadn't seen in what felt like forever. The bar they'd gone to had karaoke, and Sandra had stayed for longer than she intended as everyone gave it a try, even Lily. She remembered them all getting a cab together after the bar closed, and then she was reasonably sure she made it home, but other than that… nope. Glancing around what was thankfully her living room, she noted the bodies of several friends sprawled on various sofas and chairs. Sandra herself was on the floor, wrapped around several pillows.

God, I haven't seen a crime scene like this since college.

Her cellphone was still ringing, sitting on the end table where she dumped her keys and wallet last night. She dragged herself over to check the number, despite her nearly overwhelming urge to bury her head under the pillows. Her phone was never off, and she had to answer it. You had to be professional when you were a super villain's lawyer.

The caller I.D. read Tofu and she lurched upwards from her prone position on the floor, all the reasons why she had gone drinking in the first place coming back to her. Then she gasped in pain and held her head at the sudden movement.

"Tell them to fuck off," came Lily's muffled voice. Her head was wrapped in a blanket to block out the sunlight coming through the window.

"It's Tofu."

"I know what I said."

Sandra almost shook her head before stopping herself. Then she answered the call, her voice a bit hoarse.

"Hello?"

"Hello Sandra. I have a problem I need your help with."

A thousand thoughts flew across Sandra's mind. Everything from

Tofu having been arrested, to Tofu needing a therapist by the end of the day.

“There’s two guys in a car taking pictures, and I can’t tell if they are enemies or not.”

“...Please explain.”

Tofu explained the situation in more detail, and Sandra slowly came to realize what was going on. It was obviously an investigation of some kind, although whether or not it was Central agents or a private investigation of some kind she couldn’t guess. Not her department.

“Lily, I need you to talk to him.”

“Aghhhhhhh.”

“Time sensitive Lily.”

Sandra forcefully put the phone in Lily’s hand, and went to the kitchen to get glasses of water for both of them. She could hear Lily’s muffled voice slowly follow her from the living room.

“Alright twerp, what did you do this time?... Uh huh, *sure* you didn’t. Just give me the details… What's the license plate?...”

Lily asked a few more questions, and then accepted a glass of water from Sandra. She took a large gulp, before falling silent to consider the scenario Tofu described. After a while her scowl changed to a smirk. Sandra had seen that look before.

“Alright,” said Lily, “Here’s what you’re going to do.”

“Damn, look at the horns on that one Harris.”

“Wonder how he even gets his shirt on in the morning.”

“I think that’s a woman.”

“Pfft, as if I can tell. Just make sure you get the picture Spence.”

Spence took a picture of the mutant entering the store, while Harris lowered his window a bit to get some airflow going. The two agents had been parked in front of the clothing store all morning, and the sun was finally high enough that their car was getting cooked. Bad luck they picked the one spot not covered by an overhang, but their shift ended in a few minutes anyway. As they watched the store, another mutant approached and entered.

“Shoot, I didn’t think there’d be this many,” said Spence. “How many of those cockroaches do you think work for Hellion?”

“Who knows Spence? Could be all of ‘em, could be none of ‘em.”

“No way it’s none of them. I’d bet half the mutants in this sector have ties to Hellion.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised… then again, I’m more concerned about the normal looking shmucks that went in there. You know what kind of business a normal person has in a mutie clothing store? The kind who isn’t really all that normal. Unregistered powers, mark my words.”

“Could be…” Spence grinned,”...or maybe they’re just a bunch of freak fuckers.”

“Oh ew.”

“Getting freaky lingerie for their freaky girlfriends.”

“Stop, don’t make me barf.”

“Look there goes another one, you can just ask him.”

Spence pointed to a man who was walking to the front of the store, already laden with shopping bags, and apparently about to enter the store and buy even more. Harris went to snap a picture of the guy, when the burdened shopper suddenly turned in their direction and stared right at them.

The man was Spence. Well, not *Spence*, but it was his face. He could have been his twin brother.

“What the fuck?” asked Spence, as he stared at the reflection of himself.

“Shit. It’s the shifter.”

“W-what?”

“That’s *him*. The guy Davidson saw. The reason we’re out here.”

“Fuck! Start the car then man! We’re sitting ducks!”

“Don’t shit your britches. All he’s doing is letting us know we’ve been had. He could have been any of the people who walked into that store today. Hell, he could have been all of them. We’ve been wasting our damn time.”

“Crap,” mumbled Spence, “So what now?”

“I’m calling it in. Hopefully the supes aren’t busy with their thumbs up their asses. Keep your eyes on him wouldya?”

Spence watched the shifter, who hadn't entered the store, and was instead slowly walking away. Harris finished his call and hung up.

"What did they say?" asked Spence.

"Keep eyes on him. Cape is on the way," answered Harris, starting the car.

"Huh. Guess sometimes the supes really are around when you need them."

"That, and if he gets away we're gonna have to start implementing anti-imposter procedures. That face trick puts him in the mimic category."

"...Aw no."

"Yup. Passwords and check-ins."

"Christ."

"Cameras and a buddy system at all times. Maybe even off duty."

"...Can't we just shoot the guy? Like damn."

"Dispatcher says suspected high regen."

"...Can I shoot myself?"

"Pfft. Me first."

"**Tofu**"

Lily's solution to this problem was interesting. All I had to do was

show that I knew the two ‘investigators’ were there, display my shifting ability, and then the entire investigation comes to a dead end since I’ve destroyed their ability to make a ‘case’ against any of the individuals who frequent Babs' store. Alibis and video proof become suspect due to my ability to mimic people, and ‘reasonable suspicion’ (used to launch an investigation of a person) becomes unreasonable, since they knew I was there and actively using my power to mess up the investigation. Admittedly, it all seemed rather convoluted to me (most human laws did), but if it meant I could remove the threat without even a fight then I was all for it.

Still, this could have gone badly if I hadn’t noticed the two men in the car. A good reminder that every detail mattered, and to not become complacent. I would definitely need to ask Lily to teach me more about ‘information warfare’ in the future. Right after Nicole taught me more about electronics… and after I learned more cooking recipes… and once I was done with sensitivity training.

So many things to learn.

I made my way to the nearest entrance to Hellion’s lair, quickly losing the two agents who tried to follow me in their car. There were too many walkways and side streets, and they weren’t willing to follow me on foot. I changed my disguise the moment they were out of eyesight.

And it was a good thing I did, considering that Magenta passed overhead almost a minute later. I hadn’t realized she was in the area.

Not good. I had ducked into an area without many people to change my disguise, so there wasn’t a crowd to get lost in. I tried to act like any other civilian would upon seeing a hero, but after she made a

large loop of the area she zeroed in on me. Likely because I was still holding the bags full of Nicole's things that the investigators saw me with. I hadn't wanted to leave them somewhere on the chance they would be stolen.

Seems I would get to test my modifications after all.

"Hello ma'am, mind if I talk to you for a second?" asked Magenta when she was in range.

"Omigosh, you're Magenta! I mean, yes! It's sooooo cool to meet you!" I responded, trying my best to imitate the young women I'd heard talking at the mall. Currently my disguise was of a young mutant woman, with two arms on my right side and one on my left.

"Er, right. Sorry to ask this, but could I get your name and identification?"

"My name's Toffee. I-is something the matter?"

"Just need to see your I.D. ma'am."

"R-right. One sec."

I fumbled with my pockets and bags, stalling for time as I searched for an I.D. I didn't have. Internally I began shifting chemicals around that I might need to escape. Disguising myself as a female mutant had been a mistake. It was the most believable disguise to excuse the bags I was carrying, but I didn't have a matching I.D. for a woman, only males. I'd need to see about getting a few.

"Ma'am is there a problem?" asked Magenta. She had been scanning our surroundings, but focused on me when I failed to produce an I.D.

"I'm sorry, I can't seem to find my wallet. I must have left it at the store."

“In that case I’m gonna need you to come with me to the station to verify your identity."

“What!? What’s this about? Couldn't we just go to the store and get my wallet? I’m already late as it is.”

Her eyes narrowed, “I’m going to need you to come with me.”

“...No.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to insist.”

“This is because I’m a mutant isn’t it?”

“What!?” said Magenta, suddenly thrown off her rhythm, “No! Ma’am this is a legitimate investigation.”

“Oh please, you could have picked anyone to stop. Do you think I stole these? I have a receipt!” I waved it at her.

“That’s not what this is about ma’am.”

“So what is it then? I have the right to know what I’m being charged with!”

“You aren’t being charged with anything!”

I pulled out my cell phone and started dialing.

“H-hey! Stop that-”

“Or what? You’ll beat me up? I’m calling my lawyer.”

“Ma’am, this isn’t-”

“Hello? Yeah, I’m being detained by a really rude cape and I want to press charges.”

“Lady! You can’t just-”

__BAM__

I pretended to flinch and cover my ears as the sound of the explosion roared past us. I couldn't see it from our position, but it sounded loud and close by. Magenta immediately flew a few dozen feet in the air, forcefield blazing as she tried to source the blast. Smoke started to drift over one of the buildings in the distance, and Magenta rapidly began talking with her hand to the side of her head, presumably to a dispatcher. Her gaze shifted between me and the smoke.

"Well? That sounded important," I prompt.

She pointed down at me, "Don't move from that spot. We aren't done here."

"Oh you can bet on it!" I replied, "My lawyer will have a field day with this!"

She gritted her teeth and flew away. The moment she was out of sight I left, leaping down from the walkway I was on to the ground floor below, and running for the nearest secret base entrance as fast as I could. Ifrit's explosive distraction was likely all sound and little damage, which meant Magenta would be back soon. Not soon enough to find me again though.

This had been an interesting exercise, involving subterfuge and knowledge of legal rules to remove a threat rather than physical force. It resulted in a lot less blood shed, and fewer wasted resources (which I always approved of). I also hadn't expected my disguise to bring about so much confusion in my enemies considering they had a reasonable idea of who I might be hiding as. I would definitely need to expand my wardrobe of plausible disguises.

After I learned more about social interactions.

And sensitivity training.

And electronics.

And farming.

And information warfare.

And more cooking. Definitely more cooking.

So many things to learn. So much room for improvement.

Ch44 Slices of Life

“I can’t believe those C’s were just scoping everyone who went into Babs' store,” said Ifrit, “Ugh, I’m going to have to order everything online until this blows over. You have no idea how hard it is to find fireproof gloves that breathe.”

Ifrit had been rather irate upon finding out Central agents had her favorite clothing store under observation, and I believe the explosion she provided as a distraction was rather larger than it needed to be because of it. We had met up at one of the secret elevators to the base afterwards, and Ifrit had been muttering complaints for most of the ride down.

“Profiling jerks. I bet they were only taking pictures of mutants too,” she said, still fuming.

“They were taking pictures of everyone who went in, Ifrit.”

“Hmpf. What, were they just standing in front of the shop?”

“No, they were in a parked car down the block.”

“Oh… how’d you spot them then?”

“I noted them because they took a picture of me exiting Babs’ shop. I found it unusual,”

“What, did they have a huge sign saying 'here be cops'? Spill, what tipped you?”

“They were using a modified cellphone. Most people use their cellphones to take pictures of themselves, friends, food, or interesting occurrences. I’m not any of those things, and there shouldn’t have been anything about me worth cataloguing.”

“Right. Because of how super normal you are.”

“Exactly.”

“Uh-huh. Nice dress by the way.”

“Thank you! Babs gave it to me since I can match it.”

I was still wearing my ‘Toffee’ disguise, as I was planning to change back at the base. It hadn’t been entirely successful in helping me remain undetected, however it had sown enough doubt to allow me to leave without a physical confrontation, which I counted as a success. I had modeled the speech style after different women from the mall, but the behavior patterns were a combination of Tim and Buzzer. Beginning with Tim’s enthusiasm for heroes, and once communications failed, switching to Buzzer’s treatment of the police, which I had noted as being highly effective that time we got arrested. The name had been Lily’s suggestion, as it sounded similar to my own and was also based on a food item. Having multiple aliases that were easy to confuse with each other in casual conversation would hopefully sow doubt as to which ones were real and which ones were me in disguise. Supposedly it would also be helpful if the agent that had been talking to Babs tried to use her saying my name as ‘probable cause’ to continue with the investigations.

Human laws were convoluted.

“Say Tofu,” said Ifrit, her anger momentarily absent, “Since I have you here, I thought you should know; some of the other minions made a betting pool about where you’re from.”

“I know. Mikey told me about it a while ago.”

“Oh, good. I was kinda worried since people might be tempted to pry.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t really affect me if they know my background. I actually tried to place a bet myself last night, but Spikes said it doesn’t work that way.”

“Hah, yeah that wouldn’t fly. Are you sure you’re okay with it though? You should really hold on to personal information more tightly in this business.”

“It’s not a problem for me. Even if the heroes knew my personal info there wouldn’t be anything they could do with it. I’ve already explained my situation to Hellion and the other lieutenants in any case, so the betting pool is probably closed now.”

“Not if you only told my mother, er, Hellion and the others. It’s one thing for the employees to gossip, but talking about other people’s secret identities is a problem if the cowls do it. They need to be professional since we won’t get new hires if there’s no confidence in our confidentiality. Besides, it’s bad luck for a cowl to unmask other cowls.”

“Oh… will Imp be fine with ‘bad luck’ then?”

“What? Why?”

“He demanded I explain where I was from, or I was fired.”

“He did **what!?**”

“It’s fine. I-”

“No, it is not fine! He’s not supposed to do that! Ugh! We just got done messing with the C's because they snooped. Now I feel like a hypocrite.”

"Ifrit, it really doesn't bother me. I was actually quite pleased he gave me the option of quitting if I didn't want to talk about it. I was expecting something more lethal."

"What!? Why would you think that!?"

"Personal experience."

I spent the rest of the elevator ride telling Ifrit about my background (highly edited of course). Even skipping some of the worst elements,

her reaction was still similar to the others I had told so far. I didn't really understand why it bothered them so much. I had assured them I was fine. Humans reacted really negatively when other humans got hurt; anger, sadness, shock, fear. It kind of made me wonder, if hurting each other bothered them so much, why did humans do it so often?

"Damn Tofu, I don't know what to say," said Ifrit. "I thought growing up with my mom was difficult, but that's just... damn. That explains a lot."

"Like any aberrant behavior on my part."

"Er, sure. But you're doing great considering! You 've been picking things up really fast, with like, Adder's training and the job and stuff."

"Yes, learning quickly was part of my training."

"Ack, right... well, silver lining, and you've got a job and you aren't homeless. Heck, you've even got more friends than I do... ah-heh," she tried to rub the back of her head, but her gauntlet just clicked against her helmet.

"That's incorrect Ifrit."

"Hm?"

"You know all of my friends, and you are my friend, therefore at a minimum you have the same amount of friends that I do."

"Ah..."

The elevator opened before she could say anything else, and we headed down to the garage to bring Nicole her work clothes. We found her in the spare room which was temporarily hers, and she answered her door with a book labeled "Advanced Gizmotec Analysis Vol.2" in her hands. As I suspected last night, she had regrown another leg section, and her balance was much better for it. She

greeted us somewhat hesitantly.

"Hello? Um, hi Ifrit, and uh...?"

"This is To- uh, Toffee?" said Ifrit, turning it into a question.

"Tofu is fine when we're at the base Ifrit. It's me Nicole."

"Oh. Oh! I didn't recognize you. Wow. That is... different." She looked over my disguise, a complicated look on her face.

"I needed to be unrecognizable; there was some trouble over at Babs' store. Here's your work clothes by the way."

The three of us chatted about what Ifrit and I had been up to that morning, Nicole gasping at my encounter with Magenta, and Ifrit laughing at how I got out of it. Then Ifrit laughed harder when I mentioned I was using Buzzer as inspiration. Nicole asked if I was still up for going over some of the engineering manuals with her, to which I answered yes. Human engineering was one of the most impressive things about them, and I was eager to learn. I just needed to switch out of my disguise first.

"I dunno," said Ifrit. "You're kinda rocking the sundress. Sure you don't want to stay that way?"

"Yes, this form isn't exactly comfortable."

"What, can't handle being a girl?" she teased.

"It's more that I'm too compressed. Currently the extra mass has flattened my stomach and is pressing up into my lungs." I wouldn't have fit in the dress otherwise.

"Oh. Yeah that sounds unpleasant."

"Is that, um, safe Tofu?" asked Nicole.

"Not entirely. It slows my ability to become combat ready, and on top of that this disguise receives an uncomfortable amount of attention, increasing the likelihood of an unwanted physical encounter."

"Hmph," exclaimed Ifrit, "Tofu, you are the last person who gets to complain about getting too much attention. You do realize you get to be whoever you want right? Some people would kill for that."

"Yes, but I still need to take into account various factors to maintain disguise effectiveness. Changing my form to female triples glances per minute from passerby, and extends the length of those glances by an average factor of four. Having an obvious mutation on top of it quadruples the amount, and if it were a full-body mutat-"

Ifrit stepped on my foot, signaling me to stop talking.

"Tofu... go get changed, and I'll explain how incredibly rude you're being when you get back," said Ifrit.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

"It's fine. Go get changed."

I slunk away, hoping I hadn't said anything too bad this time. She hadn't seemed too angry though, not as much as she had been about the investigators, so I took that as a positive sign. I headed off to the locker room to change my disguise, pulling out my cellphone to call Sandra while I did so. One of the points Ifrit brought up had me curious, and I needed to ask Sandra a question. The phone rang only once before she answered.

"Did everything go alright?!" asked Sandra, immediately.

"Everything went fine Sandra. Lily's plan worked perfectly. The only surprise was Magenta showing up, but it didn't become a fight."

"Magenta!? Oh crackers. But it wasn't a fight? You're fine then? Ifrit's fine?"

"Yes, we're both back at the base already."

"Well that's a relief," she sighed.

"Yes... um, on a different note, I wanted to ask if you could help me with something."

"What's that?"

"I want to know if a statement is true, but I need your power to do it."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"Sandra?"

"...Tofu, my power works best when people don't know the details about it. I can't have you testing it."

"Oh, that makes sense... Sorry if asking was rude."

There was another small pause and then a sigh. "Just this once. Who did you want me to check?"

"Myself. The statement is: I am Tofu."

"Oh hun..."

"Was the statement true?"

"Yes Tofu, it is. Was that all you wanted?"

"Yes. I wasn't actually sure myself, and I wanted to check. Oh, but Hellion did mention there was something called sensitivity training?"

I spoke briefly with Sandra about setting up the training, then thanked her for her help before hanging up. Her confirmation about my name had surprised me. Ifrit had said I could be anyone, and she was right. I could change my form completely, and edit my mind as needed. Yet despite wearing the Toffee disguise, the name Tofu still registered as true to Sandra.

It seemed I really was Tofu.

Ifrit

"Annnd, yup. 'Toffee' just waltzed into the guys locker room," said Ifrit, watching from the door to the rec room. "Guess we should probably explain that too. Gotta say though, it's hard to be mad at him when he's so clueless sometimes."

"I wasn't mad at him," said Nicole. She wasn't very convincing, glaring at the floor as she was while absently rubbing at her elbow.

"...Maybe not. But it still stings right?"

"How would *you* know?" Nicole snapped.

*...What the hell is **that** supposed to mean?!*

Cindy was just about to snap back, when luckily it clicked: Nicole

didn't realize she was a mutant. Tofu had introduced them, but she'd been in costume every time she and Nicole spoke, and *"You're a mutant? Me too!"* doesn't exactly come up in polite conversation, nor did it normally need to be said. In costume, all her mutant features were hidden, and her raspy voice could easily just be the result of a voice changer, or smoking ten packs of cigarettes a day, or whatever else people in the mask business got up to. In costume she could easily be mistaken for a powered individual.

Oh god, and I was pushing all of those 'opportunities for disenfranchised mutants' spiels on her yesterday, like some condescending hero at a highschool pep rally. Probably thinks I'm a huge tool.

Cindy rapped her knuckles against her forehead to try to drive the embarrassment out. Then she began to remove her gauntlet. Somewhat of an involved affair, as there were multiple latches and buckles meant to keep it secured in a fight, and she had to slide the siphon mechanism out of the palm of her hand (her least favorite part). She could produce and spray the flammable substance naturally, but the gauntlets were how she did all the fancy tricks, like lobbing fireballs as if they were baseballs.

"I'm a mutant," revealed Cindy, holding out her arm for Nicole to get a good look, and displaying the fireproof, tar-like skin that kept her from burning her own hands off, "Hereditary mutation."

"O-oh," squeaked Nicole, "S-sorry, I-I thought..."

"It's fine. My fault really. I've gotten so used to trying to hide it that sometimes I'm surprised when it works."

"No, I, I just assumed, that's my fault. Your whole life? I-I've only been a mutant for, um, it'll be three years after this summer."

Pfft, ***only*** *three years she says.* While living in a sewer without family or friends. With a mutation that probably made her daily interactions a nightmare. There was no 'only' about it.

After a quick glance to see if they were alone, Cindy used her now free hand to release the latches on her helmet, and pulled the mask off. True, Cindy had just gotten done telling Tofu to be more guarded with his identity...

...But this is important.

She tucked the mask under her free arm, and reached a hand out to offer a handshake.

"Hi, my name's Cindy."

Nicole was momentarily surprised, but reached out to take the offered hand.

"Nicole. Nice to meet you."

The two of them chatted about light-hearted topics for a while, just trying to get to know each other better, until Tofu got back from changing. Then Cindy had the somewhat awkward task of explaining to Tofu why a shapeshifter who could change his body, complaining to mutants who were trapped by theirs, was rude, and somewhat hurtful. Tofu was infinitely apologetic, and promised not to do it again, but it was obvious that he didn't quite grasp *why* it bothered

them.

When Cindy tried to compare it to how he might have felt before he got his power, it was revealed that Tofu didn't remember a time without his power, and thus had no frame of reference. In order to clear up confusion and try to explain himself better, Tofu then blurted out a more in-depth retelling of his background, and to Cindy's horror it became apparent that he had softballed it immensely to her on the elevator.

The way Tofu had explained his circumstances to Cindy led her to believe he was a villain's kid kept isolated from others, and raised according to a cowl parent's insane standards. Instead, the reality was more like he had been kidnapped and experimented on since birth, which he explained with all the emotion of someone discussing the weather. He couldn't have brought a swifter end to the discussion than if he had tossed a live grenade on the floor, except instead of blasting everyone away it caused Nicole to pull them all into a hug.

After that, any attempts at explaining prejudice and privilege to Tofu were put on hold, all three of them somewhat exhausted with the heavy subject matter. Cindy left the two of them to their engineering manuals, and decided to get herself an early lunch so she could relax and get her head together. Between Nicole and Tofu, her worldview was spinning in her head.

Better get used to it. This isn't the worst the mask life can throw at me. Not if all of mom's stories are true. Wow, never thought I'd *feel like the sheltered one.*

And wasn't that the truth. Between being a mutant and having Hellion for a parent, Cindy had more than her share of life experiences. She remembered sitting in the principal's office as her mother argued with the superintendent over a possible expulsion. Cindy had inadvertently lit a desk on fire when some classmates teased her.

Or another time when the Espada had tried to kidnap her when she was sixteen. Imp and Smoke had put that attempt down before it could get off the ground though.

Or when Adder had started teaching her martial arts after a 'stray ball' gave Cindy a black eye in gym class. The thrower had snidely joked that Cindy was already wearing gloves, and should have been prepared.

Or the time...

Cindy came to a stop, lost in thought. She could remember many different events, but every time, either her mother or someone from HH had stepped in to support her.

Huh...

Maybe she'd swing by her mom's office. With lunch or something.

Tofu

For the next few days there weren't any jobs, as the Trebla job followed by the rat-stitcher's activities right after had been very 'high-profile', and it was explained to me that we needed to wait for the "heat to die down." A simple enough concept; basically we just needed to stay out of sight and let the C's get distracted by other, more immediate problems, of which Odd Summer was providing plenty. Not a day went by where the news feeds weren't reporting a new trigger, or a villain committing a crime, or various 'altercations' involving the smaller, scattered gangs, and that was just the news feed for E13. Several different sector lockdowns had occurred since summer started, and among the HH minions a new betting pool had formed based on which sectors would get locked down. The

discussions between minions who had placed bets involved lots of data, like population density and notable heroes, so I involved myself to collect information. In fact, with a temporary halt on new jobs, and a lull in major events in E13, I was able to concentrate on a long list of similar peripheral activities I had been meaning to investigate.

The most immediately important activity was of course sensitivity training, as it increased my knowledge of how to act appropriately in social situations. The training was conducted in the orientation room we used for the Trebla job briefing, and a few other minions were attending as well, mostly new hires.

It was quite informative. Some of the new concepts I learned were things like 'personal space' and 'appropriate language', but what I found to be the most important overarching concept was that of a 'verbal attack'. With this information a lot of the strange rules that humans had about language and behavior made much more sense to me. I was used to thinking of an attack as a physical thing, but it was completely possible to attack someone with information alone, as Lily had previously demonstrated with the plan she made against the investigators. You could tell a lie about an individual and weaken their position in a group, or you could use a 'slur' and weaken an entire demographic's position in 'society'. It was no wonder humans became so upset about it, I could attack far more people with a single word than I could ever do physically, and it was much harder to counter.

One 'slur' that our trainer put special emphasis on avoiding was the word 'cockroach', a slur that disparaged mutants. The word originated with a species of 'insect' that had a reputation for being hard to kill. As many physical mutations involved chitin or scales, and mutavus mutations always occurred in order to keep the host alive, the word cockroach had become associated with the mutant demographic. Personally I found it odd that being associated with a species known for its above-average survival ability was viewed

negatively, but apparently the fact that real cockroaches were insects (and therefore 'lesser' than humans) made the negative associations too insulting to ignore. I made it a priority to avoid this word and any references to it.

By the end of the class I had learned a lot, and it had illuminated the reasons behind several past negative interactions. For example; my interaction with the members of one of the smaller gangs around E13. I tended to take direct routes between destinations (through back alleys and over fences and such), and because I had gone through their territory without properly greeting or acknowledging the lookouts, I was perceived as having ignored them, implying that they were inconsequential, and potentially damaging their reputation if they didn't confront me. The fact I had been using my mask to ward away any potential muggings at the time had only made it worse, as they could have ignored a random ignorant civilian, but not someone clearly associated with another gang, even if that gang was Hellion's Henchmen. The teacher taught us several hand signs and greeting protocols we could use when I brought up the incident, all of which I meticulously recorded.

The class eventually ended, and I slowly wandered to the elevators while collating the information I had learned. I was going up to my apartment for a while to try a new recipe, and then I was meeting up with Nicole to go over some of her engineering manuals.

Her leg segments had been growing in quickly, the steady supply of speedster formula energy bars providing the essential nutrition she needed to regenerate. Unfortunately, this also meant she was getting shy again, as it became more and more apparent just how extensive her mutation was. Mikey and Ifrit had agreed to sit with Nicole and I in the cafeteria while we ate and went over manuals, so she could get used to people seeing her.

I hadn't really understood why Nicole was so sensitive about her mutation before, but after the class it made a bit more sense. I hadn't realized where all the animosity towards mutants came from. I had

assumed it was simply baseline humans' logical fear of someone who was more combat capable, but it was also the fear of becoming a mutant, and the damage it did to their social position. Due to several factors (such as the mistaken belief that you could 'catch' mutavus from mutants), antagonism towards mutants had grown to illogical levels, some mutants even becoming resentful of their own mutations. In light of this, Ifrit's reprimand of my 'flaunting' my disguise capabilities in front of Nicole made more sense, and I was glad she had informed me before I damaged Nicole's feelings any further.

I bumped researching mutavus up the priority queue. True, I hadn't been able to identify the specific strain of virus that caused mutations, but I came into contact with and destroyed trillions of microbial organisms a day. My ability to identify and manually handle these organisms using micro units meant I was uniquely positioned to be able to maybe help-

"Tofu wait up!"

My thoughts were interrupted by a coworker coming down the elevator hallway.

"Hello Tedic."

This was the minion that accompanied Mikey and I when we were setting up gizmos for Socket. I hadn't interacted with him much beyond that, as there was little value in doing so. Our only in-depth interactions had been during the social exercises held in the sensitivity training class. Tedic had been attending as well.

"Great to be out of that snoozefest right?"

"I found it quite informative."

"Man, you don't gotta pretend with me. It was super lame," he dismissed.

The elevator I was waiting for finally opened, and after two fellow minions disembarked I got on... followed by Tedic. I guess he lived in one of the apartments as well? The doors closed, and the elevator went on its way.

"Like, that whole thing was just a waste of time," continued Tedic, unprompted. "Like I need someone to tell me not to call them cockroaches. I'm cool with them, I wouldn't do that shit."

"Then why did you attend the class?"

"Had to. Some bitch got mad when I gave her a damn compliment. Some broads can be so damn touchy yanno?"

"Not really." What was a broad? I thought that word meant 'wide'. I knew the word 'bitch' had a variety of meanings, the most common I'd observed being as a term of endearment amongst long-time friends. Was a friend mad at him? I pulled out my phone to search the term and found the 'slang' meaning of the word, which turned out to be another term for woman. I added it to my growing list of words that didn't refer to women, but actually did. Slang was hard.

"Really? But you're a bonehead man, bitches should be tripping over you."

"I wouldn't let that happen." The only way I could imagine someone tripping over me would be if it was a speedster I couldn't dodge. Or if I did it on purpose.

"Why not? Ah! So you do got a girlfriend already?"

"No." This time I knew what he meant; I'd heard this word before. Girlfriend did not mean a friend that was female, it meant 'a regular female companion with whom a person has a romantic or sexual relationship'.

"Well then damn man, you gotta get out there."

"Out where?" This was getting confusing. The conversation felt like those early days right after I escaped from the lab. The words were english, but it felt like we weren't speaking the same language.

"Like, the clubs and stuff man. Tell ya what, I'm off the rest of the day. We'll head to a club and I'll show you how to score some babes."

"Er, I can't."

"Sure you can dude! Just bring your mask, they'll drop into our laps."

"No, I mean, I'm meeting up with Nicole in a bit. I don't have time to go to a 'club'."

"Nicole?...Ohhh, she's that chick with all the legs right? I get it."

"Get what?"

He grinned, "You know. You like 'em a little freaky. A little wild."

"The instructor said you're not supposed to use the word 'freak' Tedic."

"Hey no worries. I told you man, I'm cool with them. Heck, I've dropped off more than one check at the Cyborg Panda. Know what I'm saying?"

No I did not, but I recognized the reference to the Cyborg Panda, which meant his comments were somehow sexual in nature. You were supposed to avoid such things at work, or among coworkers. We'd just had a class about it.

"Tedic, I would prefer not to discuss this subject."

"Aw c'mon, don't be that way."

"Tedic, the instructor went over this. When someone says they don't wish to discuss a subject that is against workplace gui-"

"Alright alright, sheesh. Didn't think you were such a wet blanket."

He stopped talking, and we waited in silence for the elevator to reach the apartments.

But then he spoke again. "Real question though, the leggy girl, how does she, like... *do* it?"

"..."

"Is it like, hidden on the tail somewhere like a snake? Or down by all the legs? *Oh*, does she have one for each pa-"

I faced Tedic and put my hand on his shoulder. The instructor had said this gesture could indicate sincerity when addressing someone if you knew the person well, but could be construed as threatening if you didn't. I was going for the latter.

"Tedic. Company guidelines say I should report a complaint to HR rather than come into conflict with a fellow employee."

"Hey c'mon, I was just asking-"

"But as you are a fellow employee, and this concerns your immediate survival, I've chosen to tell you directly."

"What are you talking ab-"

I squeezed his shoulder a bit harder.

"Uh, dude that kinda h-"

"Nicole is a very important friend of mine, and while she is intellectually sharp, and physically strong, she is emotionally fragile, and very sensitive concerning her mutation."

The door to the elevator opened at the apartment.

"Hey, we're here..." Tedic tried to step off. My hand kept him in place.

"Your speech and behavior has the potential to emotionally damage Nicole. I can't allow that. It could potentially reduce her combat ability to an unacceptable level for maintaining her personal safety. It is only because you are a fellow employee that I am giving you this one warning," I raised my other hand so he would be sure to see it, traction claws extended, "If I think your behavior will damage Nicole, I will be forced to kill and dismantle you. Not necessarily in that order. Understood?"

"...Y-yeah man. O'course. Loud and clear."

"Good. Have a nice day Tedic."

I left the elevator feeling good. It felt great to be able to solve problems with proper communication.

"I'm just not getting it."

"It's where the circuits hit the parallax Tofu," replied Nicole as she tied a tracking collar around Mr. Chonkers neck, bribing him with a piece of nutri-bar to hold still. From what she had explained to me, the collar communicated with a tracking device similarly to the way HH masks communicated to each other, although the masks weren't built to broadcast position due to security concerns. Instead, the masks had an onboard map of the sector that was regularly updated in case you needed to navigate. Nicole had raved to me for over an hour about the complexity of the security features built into the masks, only half of which I understood. Needless to say, she was enthusiastic about her new job as one of Socket's interns.

I tried once again to attach the connector to the 'parallax'. It was supposed to be easy. You took the small wire attached to the battery, brought the other end to the parallax which was a small, green, rectangular (of course) 'chip', and then plugged it into the correct hole on the chip based upon the circuit layout.

The problem was, there were six ports in the parallax, and I could not, at all, decipher which was the correct one by analyzing the circuit patterns. This was the seventh of several collars Nicole was going to use to track the nessie herd, and I had only managed to connect one of them correctly, and *that* had been a blind guess.

It was disappointing to discover, but I just wasn't very good with human engineering.

"...Is it this one?" I asked, pointing at the third port from the right.

She looked over at the collar in my hands. "Next one over Tofu. See how the circuits are sort of attached to a central one like a backbone?"

"Yes, but I don't understand why that means the power supply needs to attach to the fourth port."

"Er, it's because, well... I mean, just look here?" she pointed, "The parallax needs to output at *this* spot so that it doesn't dump heat into the circuits. They'd melt in a second."

"... I'm sorry, I get the heat risk, but how to choose the correct port so that it doesn't happen escapes me."

"Didn't you read the manual I gave you?"

"I did, but I couldn't understand the first chapter."

"Really!? Tofu that was a middle school primer, they don't come any simpler...Ah!" Nicole grimaced as she remembered. "Sorry, I keep forgetting you didn't go."

"Nicole, I told you it's fine. It doesn't bother me at all."

"I know, it just sucks you had to miss so much school."

"Indeed. I snuck into Mikey's school for a week. It seemed like fun."

"No worries! We'll get you caught up in no time!"

I'd gotten around to telling all my friends my backstory, minus Tim of course. Nicole had taken it rather well I thought, with only a minimal amount of tears (but a bit too much hugging for my taste). The fact that I had been trapped in an underground facility was something she

could empathize with, and she'd taken it upon herself to help me adjust.

Strangely enough, Mikey was the one to take my announcement with the least amount of fanfare, declaring simply, "Dude, that fucking sucks!" and then paying for my tofu burger. I liked his reaction the most.

We finished attaching the collars to various nessies, and headed back through the sewers to the base, discussing my difficulty with engineering as we did so. I ran point just to be safe, as Nicole's claws still hadn't fully developed yet.

"Y'know, I think the problem is the tinker stuff," said Nicole. "You got caught up on section five in 'Electronics for Dummies', which is where they start to describe the gizmotec batteries, and if you can't read the primer, well, that's basically intro to gizmos anyway."

"Well, I'm not a tinker."

"Yeah, but this is the basic stuff. Anyone with even the most modest benedicci reaction should be able to... wait," she *__bapped__* her fist into her palm, "That's it. They must have never inoculated you against mutavus, which means you don't have benedicci."

"Is a benedicci reaction necessary to work with gizmos? I thought you had to be a tinker."

"You need to be a tinker for the crazy stuff like turning dirt into circuit boards, or making a mech suit in your garage from scratch. Benedicci gives the rest of us just enough of a boost to know how to work with all the stuff tinkers make."

"I see. I didn't realize I was missing out on something so crucial. It's unfortunate, but I may never be able to work with gizmos then. My power essentially makes me immune to disease, benedicci included."

She frowned, "So you wouldn't get the benefits of a reaction. But you

really can't read the primer book? Not even the first chapter?"

"No. Reading the words was fine, but trying to understand the concepts made me feel like I was trying to add two plus two in order to get five. It just didn't make sense," and caused quite a few logic errors. It reminded me of when I viewed Olson's immortality power in action.

"Weird," she scratched her head, "I didn't think you'd need a benedicci reaction for the simple stuff." She fell silent, and her hand trailed down the back of her head, catching her 'ponytail' and pulling it over her shoulder before fiddling with it and giving it small tugs. I had seen her do this many times before, and had come to know that this was her 'thinking pose'. Many humans seemed to develop physical tics like this when thinking. Some would pace, some would rub at their chins, Socket would throw things at interns, etc. I always recorded new instances for disguise data.

Nicole kept tugging at her ponytail for a few seconds, and when her eyes widened was when I knew she was finished processing.

"We should test it!" she declared. "You know they used to make cell phones even before Odd Summers. I've always wanted to try recreating one the old way, but trying to get the right parts that don't use any tinker tech is hard. But I bet we could fabricate them ourselves as long as you're doing the specifications!"

Nicole and I made plans while we walked back. Ever since she had come to live at the base, we had been doing many such small activities, the moratorium on jobs giving us plenty of free time. The day before we had spent playing Gribblin Tamer with Cindy, Mikey, and Tim using the online functionality (we convinced Mikey and Cindy to make accounts), and the day before that had been spent dragging Mikey to Adder's classes with Ifrit's help. Nicole wasn't able to spar herself (too afraid of hitting another person), but that was likely a good thing, as she accidentally shredded a target dummy when she showed Adder a move she often used against rats who

attacked her core. Against a human it would certainly have killed them. I recorded that move for later.

"Yo Tofu! Nicole! Look what I just got!"

As we entered the garage from the sewer passage, Mikey called out to us. We looked over to see him holding up a small, rectangular object excitedly. It looked like an I.D. card. As we approached I asked what it was.

"It's a driver's license Tofu," said Mikey smiling.

"Oh..."

"It's for legally driving cars Tofu," interjected Nicole, helpfully.

"Now I just need to get a car," Mikey laughed.

"What are you going to use it for if you don't have a car?" I asked.

"He's gonna use it to do his job," answered Rattleback, making Mikey jump. He had come up behind Mikey. "I need you to go pick up Pebbles and Buzzer, they're getting released today. Use the 2B exit, one of Sandra's lawyers will meet you in the parking lot. Tofu, you can be the emergency muscle. Nicole, I need you to finish the equipment checks on the sedans."

"I-I finished them."

"The rechargers are stocked?"

"Yes."

"Filters?"

"Emptied and scrubbed."

"Figure out what that whine on car five was?"

"The pulley bearings were worn. I replaced them, but I need a senior engineer to look them over."

"Hm... wanna learn how to use the fabricator?"

"YES!"

We broke up to go about our individual tasks. I was looking forward to it, as I wanted to watch Mikey drive and maybe learn a bit, and I hadn't seen Pebbles or Buzzer in quite a while now, but then Rattleback yelled back to us, "Oh, and um, do me a favor and bring Zaps with you. He's getting antsy cooped up in the base."

Dang it.

"Zip zap the cat!"

I got along with most of the people who worked for Hellion's Henchmen, even if they weren't all as friendly as Sandra or Pebbles. Many were surly, some avoided others, some were rude like Tedic, and one or two it was recommended to simply avoid, but for the most part I was fine with whoever I was paired with, and remarkably, most of them were fine with me.

Zaps though...

"Bip bap on the map!"

Zaps was likely one of the reasons why I was so easily accepted by the majority of HH. His behavior could best be described as... eccentric.

"Wip wap with the z-**Z**-z-ap!"

We were all currently in an HH van. Mikey was driving, Zaps and I were sitting in the side seats in the back, and the lawyer was riding 'shotgun'. We'd picked up the lawyer in the parking lot as instructed (a man in a suit, with a no-nonsense attitude by the name of Richard), and headed out towards sector E12.

It was a decidedly uncomfortable trip.

Mikey's driving was more or less fine, but he'd never driven a van before, which caused a few sudden jarring stops as he attempted to not hit anything. Not normally a problem for me, but Zaps wasn't good at catching himself, and tended to tumble over at the slightest bump in the road. I was desperately trying to keep my distance, as Zaps' control of his electrical power was... deficient. He produced electricity in large quantities, but could only channel it using his suit, which was outfitted with yellow gloves somewhat like Ifrit's. His minion mask wrapped around his head (and was covered in small 'stickers' depicting lightning bolts), but was open at the top to allow his long hair to flow out. Hair that often stood on its end when the static built up, which was often. When I asked him why he allowed for such an obvious defensive gap, his response had been, "Helmet

hair bruh."

"Are you going to sing the *entire* way there?" grated Richard from the front seat. Apparently I wasn't the only one annoyed.

"Tee tea totally man!"

And he did. Which made for a really long and stressful ride to E12. Especially when Zaps would hit the part of a song where he would 'rock out' and swing his head in wide circles, distributing sparks around the inside of the van from his hair. After the third time, Richard insisted he stop.

Finally we arrived outside of the E12 precinct where Pebbles and Buzzer were being kept, and Mikey nervously found a parking spot well away from the main entrance.

"This is all fairly routine, so I should be back shortly," said Richard. "Try not to get arrested while I'm gone." He left for the precinct, leaving the three of us alone, although not in silence, since Zaps had started singing again.

"Man, it feels really weird to just be parked in front of the station like this," said Mikey. "Like, we all have masks on right in front of the cops. Feels like I'm wearing a target at the shooting range."

"I was told our anonymity in the masks makes us immune to detainment without cause. They don't really know who we are, so they can't just arrest us."

"Nuh bro, they totally have my number," interjected Zaps. "Nobody forgets the zapinator! Ye-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

Mikey and I flinched back from the shower of sparks as Zaps spun his head again. Then we exchanged a knowing look (I was getting better at non-verbal body language).

"Let's... just not get arrested," said Mikey finally.

It was fifty-two minutes as we waited in the van. Mikey and I played Gribblin Tamer to pass the time, while Zaps seemed to entertain himself, but finally there was movement from the precinct entrance. A cop led a handcuffed Pebbles out the door, before removing the cuffs and apparently saying something to him. Pebbles just stretched his arms and walked off, flipping the officer 'the bird' over his shoulder. I stuck a hand out the window to wave Pebbles to our van, and Pebbles headed over, the cop glaring at him the entire time while Mikey shrank in his seat to try and avoid attention.

"Yo yo rolling stone," said Zaps in greeting as Pebbles opened the back entrance to the van.

"Ayyy, zappy boi, bringing the thunder," replied Pebbles, giving Zaps a fist bump that sparked.

"Hello Pebbles."

"Hmm? Who might you be again?"

"My name is To-"

"HA! I'm just fucking with you Tofu. It's been like two weeks, not a decade. Although I will say that Buzzer and I were **ever** so hurt that you decided to rescue the princess and not us. What ever happened to

'bros before hoes' man?"

"I'm sorry Pebbles. Poena stabbed me and I wasn't thinking clearly. Would buying you both lunch make up for it?"

He scratched his helmet, "Who's Poena?"

"The sidekick in the white suit."

"Agh, right. The brat with the technicolor crap," he shuddered, "Yeah I guess I can understand that. Haven't felt pain like that since that one time zappy boi here punched me in the nards."

Mikey flinched, and Zaps just laughed as Pebbles punched his shoulder.

"Tell ya what," Pebbles continued, "You can totally just buy us a round at the Cyborg Panda and we'll call it even."

"Pebbles, you aren't supposed to mention vulgar topics at work. The sensitivity trainer said so."

Pebbles gasped, and covered the spot on his mask where his mouth was with both hands.

"Oh no... they've *ruined* you!"

While we waited for Buzzer, I introduced Pebbles to Mikey, and Pebbles explained to me how the Cyborg Panda was in no way vulgar, and in fact, was what's known as a 'Gentlemen's Club'. It seems I had been mistaken about that. We passed the time filling Pebbles in on what had happened while he was in jail, including telling him my backstory. Pebbles just laughed and said he'd bet fifty bucks on my being a villain's kid. Eventually though, we had informed Pebbles on everything that had happened while he was in jail, and Buzzer had yet to emerge.

So we waited.

And waited.

After the third time Pebbles said, "What's taking them so damn long?" Richard exited the precinct and made his way to the van. Alone. He opened the passenger side door and got in, slamming the door angrily to close it. Then he pulled out his cellphone and started dialing.

"Where's Buzzer?" asked Pebbles.

"They aren't releasing him," answered Richard.

"WHAT!? Why the hell not?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. A moment please."

"This is some bull. Buzzer did the job, just like they wanted," grumbled Pebbles.

"What job was he doing?" asked Mikey.

"Vampire hunting."

All of our phones rang. In an alarm pattern.

Then a siren started going off in the distance.

"Ah shit."

We all checked our phones (minus Zaps, who didn't seem to notice the alarm). The message read: [Emergency! Lockdown Initiated! Please clear the sector border and seek shelter!]

"God damnit," said Pebbles. He opened the back of the van and exited, craning his neck to search for something.

"Pebbles, what are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to see the wall."

"What wall?"

"The sector wall kid... oh right, I guess you wouldn't know. It's a lockdown. Walls are going up."

He started to walk away from the van, still trying to look eastward towards E13. I looked to Mikey hoping for an answer, but Mikey was just staring at the warning on his phone, face pale, and biting his lip. Richard was angrily messing with his own phone, muttering about trying to get the emergency notice out of the way. Zaps of course sat in his seat, bobbing his head to a silent tune. I decided to exit the van and follow Pebbles. I wanted answers.

"Pebbles, why are you looking for a wall?"

"Sector wall. They go up during a lockdown. Riiiiight, there."

He pointed. From our new position we could see down a road perpendicular to the parking lot, one of the straight ones that led all the way to E13. Far off in the distance, I could almost see the border between E12 and E13.

Except that there was a wall in the way now. One that went up... and up... and up. Sections rising out of the ground between the sectors. It was absolutely massive, quickly dwarfing the buildings around it in height as it extended. When it came to a stop, it was nearly ten floors above the next tallest building. A wall of metal covered in countless scars and imperfections (such as the holes at the top, likely from where the sewer and subway tunnels intersected it), but which nevertheless looked solid and intimidating.

It was calculation-defying. I had never realized such a massive structure was hidden in the ground between the sectors. On previous trips past the border I had seen nothing of note, except that the road that followed the border was slightly larger than usual, which was now explained. This was a true feat of human engineering. This was why I wanted to learn more despite my incompatibility with gizmos.

"There's the wall bordering E13," said Pebbles, "Come on. Let's see if we can find a spot to see the E11 border."

"Pebbles, what are we looking for exactly?"

"Mhm? Oh. When a sector goes into lockdown, the message is sent to all the surrounding sectors, and it doesn't say which one is locking. Keeps people from being surprised by the wall going up, or from being stupid and trying to leave the sector in a mad dash. They want people following emergency plans, not trampling each other in stampedes."

"Ah. Does that really work?" It seemed to me there would be many ways of discovering which sector is locking quickly.

"Nah, people fall off the walls all the time."

"Then why are we checking manually?"

He shrugged, "Got anything better to do?"

We couldn't see the other side of the sector from so far away, and there wasn't any public architecture that gave higher ground (E12's blocky buildings being largely separate from each other), so I wound up scaling the side of a building to try and get a view. Adjusting my eyes for the distance, I was just able to see the wall that had risen between E12 and E11, meaning that it was E12 that went into lockdown.

And we were trapped inside.

"Well that's just perfect," said Pebbles, once I'd climbed down.

"So it's good?" I asked. I was admittedly nervous. I had seen a lot of things since I'd escaped the lab; exploding buildings, swarms of carnivorous organisms, people who could kill with a thought, but none of those had triggered a lockdown, so how bad was the situation now?

"Course not. I'm down a hundred bucks. Thought for sure E13 would get hit with a lockdown first," said Pebbles.

"Aren't lockdowns dangerous Pebbles? You don't seem very concerned..."

"Tofu Tofu Tofu," he said, shaking his head. "If you spend your time worrying about every little major disaster, you'll miss out on the good parts of life. Sure the sirens are ringing, the C's are scrambling, and we have no idea what triggered the lockdown. But the sky is blue, no one's shooting at us, and I've got a fat paycheck waiting to burn back home. Take a deep breath, smell that air," he took a deep breath himself, letting it out slowly.

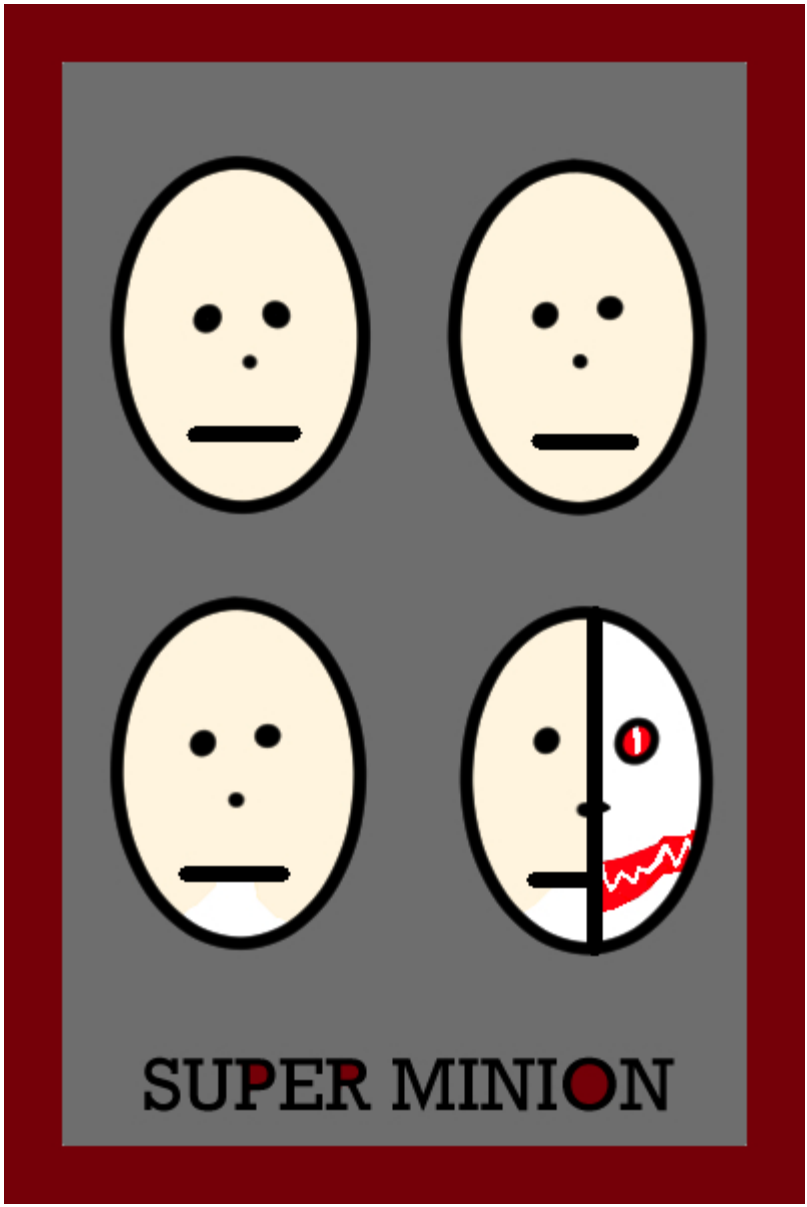
"Just another day in Fortress City."

A note from Gogglesbear

This chapter lets me finally do some time skipping. If you've been tracking the in-story clock, chapter 26 through 43 takes place within about a five day span from saturday to wednesday. Now with some time skipping, hopefully I can let a decent amount of time pass so we can get to those background plots sooner.

Also, tons of arts! Thank you all so much!

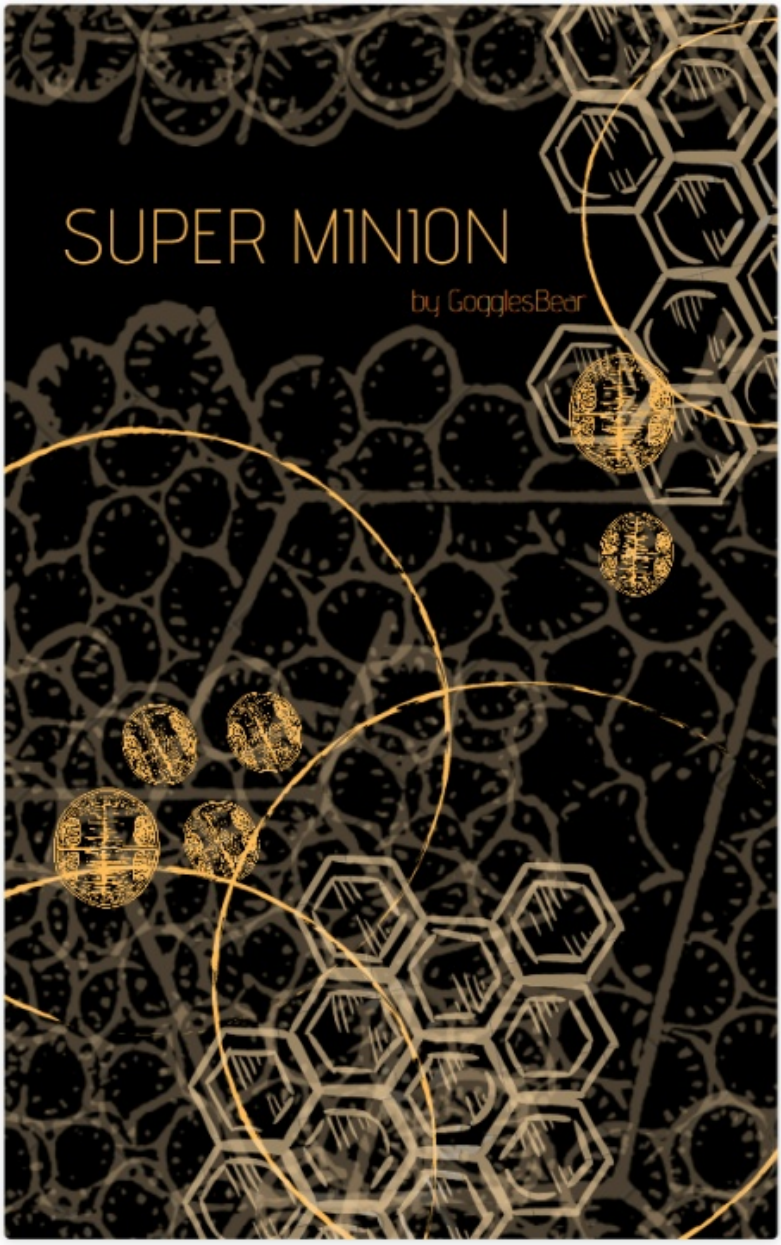
Spoiler: Spoiler



Alternative cover by SomethingNew

Tofu by Him.

Alternative cover by nahojjjen



Alternative cover by SaucySarcasm.

I actually saved this image to my hard drive ages ago and then forgot where I put it, so it's been a long time coming for me to show it. Ignore the white border, as it's due to my poor copy/paste

skills.

Lots of cover arts this time. It's like you guys are trying to tell me something...

Oh well, I'll figure it out someday. See you all next chapter.

Ch45 Bloodsuckers

Buzzer

"This is bullshit."

"Stop complaining."

"We've been at this all night! Can't we at least stop for coffee?" whined Buzzer.

"The agreement was until noon today. Until then, we're not wasting a single minute. Not until we've cleared this nest out for good," asserted the hero, a gadget user who went by the utterly pretentious name of Dark Gauntlet. Likely because the name Gauntlet and most of its variations had already been taken.

"Oh come on," continued Buzzer, unwilling to let the hero have the last word, "A few minutes either way won't swing anything."

"Then you wouldn't mind staying a bit longer to make sure we get these last strays?"

"Fuck that! I'm done with this service shit the moment the clock strikes twelve."

"Tch, and then what? You'll just go back to shoveling Hellion's shit instead. At least you're doing *some* good here."

"Don't know what you're talking about Gloomy Glove. I was held hostage and forced to work by Trebla."

"Pfft, please, tell me another *Joy Buzzer*."

"Your *face*!"

Dark Gauntlet just grunted in disgust and turned back to the front of

the van, unwilling to carry on the juvenile back and forth.

Likely cause that's the best he's got. Joy Buzzer? Really? What a putz.

Buzzer nodded his head in satisfaction at 'winning' the argument, then settled back into his seat to continue scanning for vamps. Dark Gauntlet and the other two federal agents in the van with him had been carting Buzzer around for almost two weeks, using his power to ferret out the damn bloodsuckers, and Buzzer was just about *done* with this crap, prompting him to constantly drag the cape and agents into pointless arguments in his irritation. True, the work wasn't all that hard, since he didn't have to kill the things himself, and if he hadn't gotten caught he probably would have still wound up hunting vamps for Hellion anyways, so it wasn't exactly a waste of his time. Couldn't have vamp rumors around the Red Zone after all, scared the tourists.

*But the difference is, I get **paid** when I do it for Hellion.*

Buzzer's demeanor soured once again at the thought he wasn't being paid, but he dutifully went back to scanning for any vampire~y sounding sounds, if only so that the C's couldn't try to claim he hadn't lived up to his side of the bargain and try to hold up his release. He focused his attention outward, trying to pick through the many, many sounds produced by a bustling sector, separating extraneous sounds from anything that sounded promising.

Easier said than done though. It was very much a mask in a madhouse situation. They blended right in.

E12 was of course packed. It was the main thoroughfare into E13 (and therefore the Red Zone) for most of the city, and had managed to set up a reputation as the 'safe guardhouse' to the Red Zone's wilder infamy. All bullshit of course. It was just as dangerous as any of the outer sectors, but with its restrained architecture, powerful hero team, and the former Espada having driven most mutants away, the sector attracted many a tourist to stay a night in its stately hotels and commute to the Red Zone in the morning (or evening more likely). An endless parade of tourists and transportation.

All of which made it rather difficult for Buzzer to identify the telltale sounds of a vampire. Was that person in the alley silent because they were smoking a cigarette on their break? Or was it because they were a vampire and couldn't speak? Were those two accelerated heartbeats in a private room a couple getting down? Or was it a victim enduring the vampire's latest feeding? You couldn't always distinguish a vampire from a human by sound alone; the sound of their heartbeats were too similar. A fact that Buzzer had always found distinctly creepy.

*Come **on**. Just where did they get to?*

They'd found three nests over the past two weeks. Kinda high for a single sector, but one of the nests had been a fresh offshoot, so luckily it seemed they had caught the vamps as they were building up to scatter and disperse. Only problem was that his cape babysitter had let two of the vamps get away from the nest they hit last night. With every minute that passed, and every beam of sunlight that filtered out over the rooftops of E12, it was more and more likely that the two runaway vamps would go to ground for the day, which would make finding them nearly impossible. It was a vain hope, but if he could find these last two stragglers before that happened, maybe the cape would let him leave early, and not waste half of Buzzer's day trying to find more nests that likely didn't exist.

eeEEee

Buzzer heard the whine and latched onto the sound. It had come from only two blocks away. He held his breath and listened closely, hoping it wasn't just an old air conditioner or something.

eeeeeEEEEeeeee

"Got one. North of us, about a block and a half."

"You sure?"

"Would I have said something if I wasn't? North. Let's go!"

The driver grumbled but changed lanes, then turned the van north. Buzzer guided them to an area full of identical looking apartment buildings, boring and drab like most of the sector. Telling the central agents to shut up for a moment (they hadn't said anything), he then narrowed the location down to somewhere between two buildings on their left. He had the driver pull into the alley between the buildings.

"Alley looks empty to me Buzzer," said Dark Gauntlet.

"It wasn't in the alley, it was up in one of the buildings."

"Shit. Did it attack a civilian?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Make yourself useful and check for broken windows or something."

The hero went to do just that, slamming the door to the van as he exited and causing Buzzer to curse at the unexpected *__bang__*. For the millionth time he wished his power had presented in a different way; he didn't have super hearing, he manipulated the soundwaves so they reached him, and it was rather easy to blow out his own eardrums if he wasn't careful, something he'd already done several times over the years. Practically a bad trigger if you thought about it.

Thank God for HH health insurance, jeez.

The hero saw no signs of a forced entry on either building, so they were forced to wait as Buzzer scanned the area, waiting for the tell-tale whine of a vampire.

...*eeEEee*

"Ha, got her. Left side, third floor, sixth window from the right."

The hero approached that section of the building, "I don't see any forced entry Buzzer. You sure?"

"Yes I'm sure, I'm a professional. Unlike some people I know."

The cape scoffed, "I just don't want to interrupt *another* couple Buzzer."

"That only happened once!" *and it was hilarious!*

Dark Gauntlet shot a grappling hook from his glove that latched a few floors above the target window. Then he scaled the building, the mechanical systems in his gloves and the hero's own training making quick work of the vertical distance. Buzzer had to admit, for a B-list

hero Dark Gauntlet could *move* when he needed to, and his combat skills were rather impressive. Vampire nests tended to have around three to five vamps per, and Dark Gauntlet had taken out all the ones they'd found by himself, making the extra agent waiting in the van with the bolter redundant (although Buzzer suspected the agent's true purpose was probably to keep an intimidating eye on him). He was the kind of hero that minions hated. Not enough of a threat for the villain you're working for to stop their *oh so important* plans and help, but skilled enough that even an above average crowd of mooks would be going home with broken bones and hospital bills.

Dark Gauntlet reached the window in question, and hesitantly leaned in to look in case Buzzer was being a little shit again. This time though it seemed Buzzer was on the money.

"I see it. Confirming no armband. Going in."

The hero flexed his legs and kicked off from the building, arching out over a dozen feet away from the wall before reaching the end of his swing and reversing course. He hit the window feet first, gizmos in his boots shattering the glass away from him and into the room. Then the fight was on, Dark Gauntlet attacking the surprised vampire in a flurry of punches, kicks, stun batons, and whatever else was stored among the hero's gadgets. The vampire reacted quickly, counter-attacking with claws, strength, and of course attempting to bite the arrogant human prey that dared attack it, a high-pitched whine streaming forth from it the entire time and setting Buzzer's teeth on edge. An epic fight that would have fit into any action movie with ease.

Or at least, that's what it all sounded like to Buzzer. There was far too much noise for Buzzer to make out exactly how things were going, especially with the droning whine the vampire was producing. He

contented himself with imagining the clawed fists that were no doubt punching the daylights out of the rugged hero. Maybe they'd get into a desperate scuffle that would wind up with the vampire biting his ass or something. *Heh.*

But unfortunately, Buzzer had to put that humorous fantasy on hold, as he could hear the second whine that was picking up in another room of the apartment. The door to that room had been closed, making him think the corresponding heartbeat was in an apartment next door. Perfect echolocation his power was not.

"Heads up, sounds like the other one is here. Coming at you from somewhere in the rooms to the left of the entry point."

"You couldn't mention that sooner!?"

"Bite me, I can't tell them apart from people unless they use their wings."

"Maybe I'll let *them* bite you!"

The second vamp joined the fray, and the discordant noise they put out drowned out Buzzer's ability to listen, the whine giving him a headache.

Ugh. I could have had eye lasers or something, but noooooo.

eeeeeeeEEEEEEE

What?

Buzzer leaned forward in his seat, concentrating hard. The apartment was a mess of noise, but that whine had come from a different floor altogether.

"Ah, bad news, looks like we might have a third vamp."

"What!?"

"Er, four actually. No wait, five."

"Buzzer stop fucking around! How man- **Oof**," Dark Gauntlet's words got cut off by a punch to his gut.

"I'm not! Looks like we found a fourth nest. They must have, uh..."

*eee**EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE***

What the hell?

Across the entire face of the apartment building, heartbeats he had thought to be the apartments' occupants were suddenly being paired with the droning whine of vampire wings. Even the other two agents in the van could hear it now; it was practically rattling the windows. This wasn't just a nest, the building was completely and utterly *infested.*

And the building behind them was beginning to buzz as well.

"Hey Gloomy Glove? Time to go buddy."

"Almost, got, it..." there was a small *__bang__*, and a single heartbeat ended, along with its associated whine, "...Did you just call me buddy?"

The increasing drone of the surrounding vampires cut out for a single moment, then doubled in its previous intensity, quickly followed by the tinkling of breaking glass.

"*Get out of there!*"

Dark Gauntlet to his credit didn't question him or waste time, disengaging from the second vampire and leaping out the same window he entered, grabbing the still hanging grapple line to slow his fall. Then the cable snapped, cut by a vampire that had emerged from a higher floor. His gizmo infused boots took the brunt of the fall, allowing him to transfer the momentum into a roll, and he was up and sprinting for the van in seconds. After a brief look over his shoulder to see what had Buzzer so worked up, he immediately began screaming into his com for backup. The two central agents in the van were likewise quick on the uptake, the one with the gun sticking it out a window to cover Dark Guantlet's retreat, the one driving already hitting the gas to intercept the hero's path and get them out sooner.

The next few seconds were a blur of activity. Dark gauntlet lept for the open door of the van and just managed to grab hold of the doorframe. The agent with the bolter began firing off rounds, three vampires landed on the roof, and the driver floored the pedal, lurching the van towards the mouth of the alley. Buzzer concentrated on using his power to keep the overwhelming buzzing whine from making their ears bleed...

__BAM__

...and then something big hit the side of the van, rolling it end-over-end.

When it finally came to a stop, Buzzer threw up. On one hand, his helmet detected the bile and automatically unlocked the mouth panel to let it out. On the other hand, he was suspended nearly upside down, and the vomit just splashed back and leaked under his faceplate anyways.

"**Agh!** Pfft, pfft, pfft... eew."

He oriented himself, then undid his seatbelt buckle to get down, forgetting he was still handcuffed to the side panel. It wrenched his arm and slammed him against the side of the van.

"Agh, goddamn it! Gloomy Gl- Dark Gauntlet! Get this thing off of me!"

"One second."

"We don't have a second!"

Buzzer spun in place, suspended by the handcuff. His feet just barely reached the 'floor', but he was having trouble standing due to his dizziness and the uneven footing. When he finally got turned around to view the central agents, what greeted him was a grim sight. The driver had been buckled in, but the agent with the bolter had gotten tossed like a peanut in a tin can. His neck was snapped, and Dark

Gauntlet was pulling the bolter out from under the man's corpse one-handed, his own left arm limp at his side.

The gun finally came loose, and Dark Gauntlet immediately pointed it at Buzzer and shot the handcuff chain to snap it-

"*JESUS!*"

-before turning to the driver and helping the dazed man out of his upside-down seat.

"I'll cover you two," said Dark Gauntlet once the man was upright, "We'll aim to get inside somewhere and barricade ourselves. Reinforcements are coming."

The door to the van was already ajar, and Dark Gauntlet led the way with the bolter while the driver and Buzzer stumbled out after him. Right away Dark Gauntlet started snapping off rounds at the vampires that were swarming after them. Buzzer sprinted past him towards the nearest building that didn't sound like an angry beehive, not sparing a single glance over his shoulder, and already using his power to probe the area around him to try and plan his escape. This wasn't his first rodeo, a lifetime of working as a minion meant he'd had to run through more than one chaotic mess with his head down.

Let's see, all the angry vampires are behind me, and the big thing that hit us was... you've got to be kidding me.

"Really!? You let a truck hit us? Learn to drive a getaway van, asshole! There's like no traffic this early and you hit the one damn truck on the road?!"

"Not exactly... the time... for this!" said the agent, gasping.

Needs to enhance his cardio routine too.

The two of them ran across said nearly empty street to another apartment building. Luckily one of the residents was just coming out of the main entrance, and the two nearly barreled into the man.

"Move it or lose it!" yelled Buzzer.

The man recoiled in shock. Either he recognized the HH uniform, or perhaps he was finally noticing the vampire swarm.

"Central agent! Get inside!" said the agent, following Buzzer in.

The three of them scrambled into the antechamber of the building, only Buzzer and the agent stopping to look back out the door at the hero. Dark Gauntlet had held the leading edge of the swarm back nicely; a bolter with a full clip went a long way.

But he'd gone back for the truck driver.

He wasn't going to make it.

They waited with the door open of course, but Dark Gauntlet and the man he tried to save were swarmed by dozens of vampires before they got even halfway across the street.

Damn heroes. Every time.

They closed the door, and retreated further into the building.

Tofu

"Any news on the Buzzer situation?" asked Pebbles as we returned to the van.

"Yes," replied Richard, putting his phone away, "but it's bad news unfortunately, they don't have him. The hero he was assigned to sent in a request for backup right before they went missing earlier this morning. They haven't released all the details yet, but the current understanding is they uncovered a larger than average vampire nest. That's what triggered the lockdown."

"...Shit. How long ago was this?"

"Around five a.m," answered Richard.

Pebbles fell silent, then leaned against the van with his arms crossed. One of his hands eventually came up to tap at his helmet. Another

'thinking pose'.

"That's over five hours ago," continued Richard.

"..."

"The odds he's alive are-"

"Shut up. You said *they* said he's missing. *Missing*. If there ain't no body then there's no proof he's dead."

"And the proof he's alive?"

"Vamps take people alive all the time."

"During Odd Summer?"

"Shut *up*. I'm thinking."

Richard sighed in exasperation, but fell silent.

Pebbles tapped at his helmet a bit more, but finally said, "Fuck it. I'm going to go look for him."

"During a lockdown?"

"Yup."

"Without a cowl to legitimize this little activity?"

"*I'm off the clock!* Look, if you wanna hole up somewhere **fine**, but I'm not leaving Buzzer for dead. If you've got a problem with that you can fucking sue me."

"I don't have a problem Pebbles, I'm just your legal representative and thus am obligated to point out the obvious. Need to cover my ass when Ms. Baker asks where you are."

Pebbles flinched, the reminder of the 'talking to' he'd likely get from Sandra stealing most of the energy from his demeanor. I sympathized.

Pebbles sighed, "Yeah, I'm not exactly in her good books right now. Look, we'll head to the nearest lockdown shelter so you guys can hunker down, but afterwards I'm taking the van and doing a loop of the sector. Buzzer will have his mask set to open broadcast if he's alive, so there's a chance, and if a hero stops me or something all the better, they can fucking help me look."

"Ah don't be dull you golem," said Zaps, poking his head out of the van, "If you're having a party I'm coming."

"Ha. Yeah, I should probably bring the human bug zapper shouldn't I."

Richard rolled his eyes at the exchange, but added, "I'll stay here at the station. It's safe as any shelter, and if the situation changes I'll let you know."

"Thanks. I'll drop the rookies off at a shelter and then be on my way. Unless you two want to hole up in the police station?" Pebbles asked, turning to us.

"Uh, not really..." answered Mikey.

"I'm not coming?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"No, I'd rather Sandra not rip my head off for repeating the same mistake twice. Senior members only I'm afraid."

"I see. I'll stick with Mikey then." The police donuts were likely stale anyways.

"Alright then. Now scoot over kid," he directed at Mikey, "First thing

to know 'bout rolling with Pebbles: I drive."

"Zaps, I insist you maintain a work appropriate personal distance!"

"I'm not even touching you dude!"

"You're getting sparks on me!"

"It's just static! Chill your beans!"

"...Is that an insult?" Cold beans were not tasty.

"Cut it out back there!" yelled Pebbles from the driver's seat, "Zaps! Cut that spark shit out! Tofu! Your suit is insulated, stop being a baby!"

"I don't like shocks..." Especially not while my skeleton was made of a conductive material. I'd discovered that flexible chitin was surprisingly good at conducting electricity, which was both good and bad. On one hand, if I was lucky, electricity would just flow right through from the point of contact to the nearest contact with a 'ground'. On the other hand, if I was unlucky, the electricity could spark to all of my inner organs and fry most of them. Considering that a maintained current along my skeleton would also disrupt my micro units' ability to receive the signal from my core, the 'being fried' probability rose rapidly as the micro units embedded in my skeleton slowly self-destructed due to a degraded core signal. Testing with some of Nicole's batteries led me to believe I had around five to six-and-a-half seconds to remove myself from any electrical source before catastrophic system failure occurred. To make matters worse, while my core was originally highly shielded from electrical mishap, it was likely my ad hoc brain surgery to escape the lab had compromised that security feature. I was, of course, unwilling to test this possibility and risk damaging myself when a single bad jolt could theoretically fry parts of my core permanently. I'd put in my own shielding, but electricity was finicky when it came to organic parts.

Which was why I was swiftly losing patience with Zaps and his cavalier attitude towards electricity.

Pebbles sighed and turned back to Mikey, who was on his phone.

"Any word on Buzzer?"

"Er, Rattleback says he's not getting a ping from Buzzer's mask, but he's not sure if it's because of interference or being out of range or, um, other reasons..."

Pebbles snorted in response.

"He, uh, also says he can't get anyone to us with the lockdown."

"Eh, I didn't expect him to."

"And he said to tell you that you, um, quote, 'need to get your ass to a shelter,' unquote. He told me specifically to phrase it that way."

"Bah, I'm already taking you rookies to the shelter. You'd think they didn't trust me or something. As if I didn't have two decades of minion work under my belt; I know how to keep my head on my shoulders."

"Damn Pebbles," said Zaps, "Didn't know you were such a fossil."

"I'm only thirty-five you prick!" responded Pebbles. Zaps just laughed in response, so Pebbles briefly swerved the van to slap Zaps' head into the side of the vehicle.

"Pebbles, I thought HH was only established fifteen years ago?" I questioned.

"I did some minion work before I joined up. HH isn't the only gig in town you know, even if it is the best. Got my first job working with a guy named Hexidec. Bit of a shitshow, but it was decent money, and I've been henching ever since."

"That's a pretty impressive career length though," said Mikey, after the van stopped swerving, "Um, got any advice for getting through Odd Summer?"

"HA! There's no secret kid. Keep your head down, eyes open, and your feet moving. All there is to it. Oh, and never join a 'quick cash run' where the cowl's big 'score' is a bank. You'll get pinched for sure, case in point," he pointed at himself, "In fact, best to just avoid bank jobs all around if you can. Oh! And this one's important: never join an established crew on a job where they 'only need one more person.' Especially if they all wear robes; that's a good way to get sacrificed, or fed to their pet monster or whatever. Especially don't work with cowls who use pets. If their giant dog minions or whatever are as well trained as they're *supposed* to be, what the hell do they need *you* for? Snacks and chew toys, that's what. Let's see, what else... **Oh**! Absolutely ***no clowns!***"

Pebbles continued to inform us on dos and don'ts of the industry, which both Mikey and I listened to with rapt attention. Zaps chimed in once or twice with his own observations of the job, but I was a bit hesitant to trust them. Humans were on a sliding scale when it came to how reliable they could be, and I was quickly learning just how large that sliding scale actually was. Zaps was at the much lower end of that scale. Pebbles might 'embellish' his stories, but at least there was obviously valuable info contained in them.

"What about vampires?" I asked between anecdotes, "Have you ever fought them?"

"Oh pfft, all the time. They pop up every Odd Summer. Buzzer is a pro at finding them, so team three gets stuck with pest control sometimes. Nasty things. Not really all that strong, but their bite will drain you in seconds flat, so, you know, don't get bit. Oh, and keep your eyes up, they can't really fly, but they love crawling on the ceiling. Creepy fucks."

"And if they bite you, they steal your power," declared Zaps, suddenly.

What?

"WHAT!?"

"Uh huh, if they drink your blood, they get to use your power."

"Really!?" I turned to Pebbles and Mikey for confirmation.

"Yup," said Pebbles from the front seat, nodding his head, "And if they drain you, they keep it *permanently*. That's why they come out during Odd Summer, I think. Looking to steal powers from fresh supers like you."

"They can *all* do this? How is this not a huge problem?"

"Cause they're usually rare. Why do you think they locked down just because of one big nest?"

Calculating...

New priority added to queue.

...This changed everything. If all the vampires had this ability, then it was possible it was biological in nature. More likely it was a species-wide trigger like with banshees and their paralyzing scream, but there was still a *chance*. Even if there was a slight, *slight* risk of being bitten and having Human.exe stolen, the ability to permanently steal other's powers was too valuable to not take that chance, and my experience with killing Sanguine led me to believe I was, or could

become, immune to most blood-related abilities anyways. Now I just needed to convince them to take me along when searching for Buzzer. Wasting my time in a shelter when there was a good opportunity to acquire vampire samples would be such a lost opportuni-

__Snrk__.

Zaps made a weird sound, then started laughing

Then Pebbles started laughing. I was a bit confused, I hadn't heard anyone say anything that might constitute a joke.

"Oh man, I can't believe you swallowed that," said Zaps finally, "That's like the oldest gag in the book."

"Gag?"

"Vampires can't take your power Tofu. This ain't a movie," said Pebbles chuckling, "We tell that to all the newbie sup's. Didn't think we'd scare you that bad though."

"I wasn't scared."

"Ya right," said Zaps, "You were shaking in your boots. Should have seen the look on your face."

"... But I'm wearing a mask."

They both laughed, and even Mikey was trying to suppress a grin. I recognized his facial expression from our time hanging out with Tim. Now I knew what was going on.

"Ah. You are 'ribbing' on me."

"No duh. A bit slow on the uptake there aren't cha," said Zaps.

"I have trouble recognizing jokes."

"Go easy on him Zaps, you heard his story," said Pebbles.

"Yeah yeah, that's why I hit him with the softball."

"I would have dodged a softball,' I responded, "Either way, I don't think that was a very good gag Zaps."

"I didn't think so either, but you fell for it pretty handily."

"That's why it's bad. False info is dangerous in a combat situation," and disappointing when it could have been such a large advancement. So disappointing.

"Alright, alright, I woulda' illuminated your lightbulb before anything happened. Here, how about you hit me back with one? You've gotta work on your jabs."

> Excess of slang homonyms used.
>
> Calculating...

"You... want me to tell you... an insult?"

"Yeah man, do your worst."

"Uh, can we wait until after the lockdown to practice ribbing? I wouldn't want to inadvertently hurt your feelings and lower your combat efficiency more than it already is."

"Perfect! Now you're getting it!"

"...Huh?"

I was having trouble tracking Zaps' conversation, but apparently I was better at ribbing than I thought I was, because both Pebbles and Mikey began laughing. That was a relief, since humans operated much better when emotionally stable and relaxed, and I wanted my allies in top form while this lockdown was occurring.

The drive to the shelter took longer than it should have considering the short distance, which prompted Pebbles to lean out the window and threaten other drivers, who tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to move out of his way when they saw his mask. However, when we were only a block away, Pebbles quickly ducked back into the safety of the van.

"Ah shit," he said, "I don't think she saw me, but keep your heads down."

Spying out the front windows, I spotted the telltale purple glow of Magenta. She was flying over our heads, accompanied by another flying super wearing a jarring red and white jumpsuit with a brown leather jacket thrown over it. Babs would not have approved.

"Who is that?"

"Uh, I think that's... Aven? Aviator? Something like that. He's from NE13."

"Is he dangerous?"

"Nah, minor telekinetic besides the flying. You're probably gonna see a lot of B-list capes, the heavy duty enforcers don't normally get

mobility powers so they take a while to get anywhere. Our favorite gal in purple excluded of course. Kinda surprised Central hasn't snapped her up yet."

"She's on probation," supplied Mikey, "A friend of mine heard about it. She was apparently part of a gang before she triggered."

"Huh, no shit? Always wondered why she was stuck out here in the boonies."

"So how many heroes are going to come?" I asked.

"Anyone nearby who can. Probably just one or two from each nearby sector though. If it's just a bunch of vamps the lockdown's probably just to try and keep them from scattering to the winds. They're a bitch to hunt down if they scatter."

"Uh... I think they're heading in the same direction we are," said Mikey, who had been tracking the fliers' progress. Indeed, the two heroes turned down the same street that most of the traffic was heading.

"...Huh."

Pebbles didn't say anything more, and didn't stick his head out the window to hurry other drivers. Mikey seemed nervous about the near encounter with heroes and kept surreptitiously scanning the sky while slouching in his seat, and Zaps just tapped a rhythm to some unknown song on his mask with his fingers.

Eventually the traffic crawled forward, and we made the turn to the shelter, giving us our first view of the building. It was built to match the surrounding buildings; tall, blocky, and without much decoration, but the windows had metal shutters, and the ground floor was obviously reinforced and looked like it could withstand the rest of the

building collapsing on it.

Which was a good thing, considering the upper levels were on fire. Police were directing traffic away from the building, from which gouts of smoke and fire were pouring from the windows, which I thought was impressive considering most Fortress City buildings were built to be fireproof. While we watched, a flaming figure crashed out of a window only to be intercepted by Magenta before they hit the ground. If they were lucky, mutavus would activate before they expired. Strangely, two non-flaming figures soon followed out of the same window, only to be intercepted by the red and white dressed hero who arrested their fall with telekinesis, but then lowered them towards other capes waiting on the ground who opened fire. I assumed these were the vampires, but they didn't look at all like the ones from Mikey's movies. In fact, it was rather hard to distinguish them from regular humanoid mutants. Maybe the heroes identified them by the lack of armbands?

"Hey Pebbles?"

"...Yes Tofu?"

"I would like more information on vampires now."

"...You and me both."

A note from Gogglesbear

Fun fact: Tofu's story was originally going to be set in an urban fantasy setting. He'd go around eating vampires, out-shifting werewolves, and punching fae in their smug faces all with the power of science, but I could never figure out where the story was supposed to go from there, so that idea never happened.

Ch46 Food Chain

After the rather spectacular devastation at the shelter, we decided to stick together. It was unclear what exactly happened, but it was likely that the vampires had infiltrated the shelter somehow, and inadvertently caused a trigger event or some other such accident. Pebbles assured me that this kind of overt action during the daytime was completely outside of their normal behavior, and as such, splitting up was no longer a safe option. Not if the vampires were acting en masse and erratically.

Since then, we had been following Pebbles' original plan of driving around and hoping to hear Buzzer over the radio. I was helping by listening for the 'distinctive whine' that vampires made. I hadn't encountered vampires before, but Mikey helpfully pulled up a sound file from the internet for me to memorize. It didn't sound like anything from the horror movies Mikey sometimes made me watch, and when I pointed out that incongruence, I was quickly informed by everyone in the van that vampires were, in fact, *not* related to the vampires in movies. They were only named after them due to similarities in diet and behavior.

"So why are they swarming during the daytime?" I asked the group.

"Why else? Odd Summer. Some jagoff probably triggered a control power or something," replied Pebbles from the driver's seat.

"Hey, if they have a master power, that makes them the master vampire!" said Zaps.

"Hilarious," replied Pebbles, grumpily. We hadn't had much success in finding Buzzer so far, and Pebbles didn't seem to be taking it well. He had taken to grumbling under his breath at any driver who slowed him down even a little, and his "hectic yet effective" driving style was now just hectic. Obviously his emotional distress was affecting his performance. But, now that I had gone through sensitivity training, I

knew what to do.

I patted Pebble's shoulder twice, gently. This gesture was similar to the workplace allowable gesture of tapping someone's shoulder twice to get their attention, but used the whole hand. Supposedly this would convey that I was emotionally invested in Pebble's wellbeing.

"There there, Pebbles. We'll find him."

A possible lie of course; I didn't know Buzzer's current status. He was most likely dead, but lying about it would hopefully help improve Pebbles' performance until the lockdown was over. As long as Pebbles lived *now*, he could recover emotionally eventually.

"Oh get off! Of course we are!" said Pebbles, slapping my hand away exasperatedly. I was worried for a second that I had chosen the wrong action, but Zaps was snickering, so I likely hadn't overstepped social bounds too badly, and Pebbles' driving performance improved by about eleven percent. Not back up to his best, but better. Objective achieved.

"That said, this isn't working," continued Pebbles, after he finished grumbling, "We need a new plan."

"Oh, dude!" said Zaps, "I could zap the van and super charge us! We could just zoom around the sector real quick!"

"...That's not how that works."

"You sure?"

"Considering you blew up the engine the *last time* you tried it; pretty

sure."

"Ohhhhh, right. I forgot about that."

Pebbles sighed, "Any *sane* ideas?"

I considered possible options. My normal method of tracking was via scent, but that required me to know where Buzzer was last seen, and could be unreliable even if I knew where that was. My previously successful hunt of Sanguine was admittedly more due to luck than skill (I eventually came across one of his minions reeking of blood and just followed them). Attempting to listen for vampires was a better option, but also came with its own difficulties. What little practice I'd done with acoustics was limited to dampening them (due to the Banshee encounter) and sounds within the range of human speech. Plus, it relied on the vampires actually making noise in the first place. Frankly, among our little group in the van, we didn't have the power set necessary to narrow down the search range.

"Pebbles, are there any cowls who might be willing to assist us? Someone with a tracking powerset?"

He considered it for a moment, "Eh, I know of a couple, but not really anyone who would help us. Not many cowls willing to step into a lockdown. If there are, I'm sure Rattleback is probably asking them already."

The van fell into silence for a bit.

"What about heroes?" asked Mikey, hesitantly.

Pebbles shrugged. "If they come across him before we do they'll save him. I wouldn't rely on it though. They've got a whole sector to worry about, they won't go out of their way for a minion."

"Right, but they know where the vampires are. Maybe we could follow them?"

Pebbles paused, then turned slowly towards Mikey, who slowly withered under Pebbles silent stare. Then Pebbles punched him in the shoulder.

"HA! That's what I'm talking about rookie! Minions chasing after heroes, it's just crazy enough to work."

Pebbles hit the gas and swerved around the car in front of us, pressing Mikey into his seat, and sending Zaps bouncing around the floor. Several drivers honked their car horns in anger at the maneuver.

I was pleased to see that Pebbles' driving was back to normal.

Traffic lessened as time went by, likely due to people filtering towards shelter once the lockdown was announced. It made finding a police car easy, and we followed it until we encountered a hero on a reinforced motorcycle. It was Ferrosa, her metallic skin and clothing making her look like a part of the bike.

Pebbles followed her to a police cordon outside an apartment building, being sure to drive well back. Now I could definitely hear vampires, and Pebbles set to circling the area. All four of us tried to listen for Buzzer, switching channels on our helmets just in case

Buzzer hadn't set his to openly broadcast. Unfortunately, we heard nothing. I offered to sneak into the building and look, but Pebbles said it wasn't worth the risk if we didn't know for sure. Instead, we decided to follow a police car that drove away from the scene with its siren wailing.

We didn't find Buzzer at the next site.

Or the next.

But to my surprise, at the fourth site outside another apartment building, our helmet radios crackled to life.

"God I need coffee..."

"***BUZZER! I fucking knew it!***" yelled Pebbles, causing Mikey to jump in his seat, "Where the hell are you?!"

"...and a donut... kingdom for a donut..."

"Buzzer?"

"...dark in here...someone turn the lights on... no wait... don't..."

"Buzzer? Buzzer?! Can you hear me? Can he not hear me? Try talking

to him guys."

We all tried to get Buzzer's attention, but it seemed he really couldn't hear any of us.

"Can we send him a text instruction?" I asked, "Imp sent me one when I was lost."

"Right, someone call Rattleback and tell him to send Buzzer a ping. Heck, tell him to ping us all. Make sure this is working."

Mikey did so, and soon we all received texts from our masks, but Buzzer didn't react to it from what we could hear. Rattleback confirmed that Buzzer's mask didn't send back a confirmation ping.

"Bah," said Pebbles, "We'll do this the old-fashioned way."

The 'old-fashioned way' consisted of driving around the area and trying to approximate Buzzer's location from how much static was on our radios. It worked surprisingly well; however, it also placed Buzzer's location in a rather difficult to reach spot.

"So he's inside the building surrounded by police. That's... not the worst thing ever," said Pebbles. "Yeah, you know what? This is good. We can just let the heroes handle it. They'll rescue Buzzer, and then we can just pick him up afterwards," he nodded to himself.

I agreed. It was somewhat disappointing that I wouldn't get vampire

samples, but if the heroes would take on the task (and the risk) then all the better. Perhaps they would have some samples at the nearest morgue I could appropriate later.

Pebbles parked the van a half block away from the cordon, in a spot where we had a good view of the building. It was another of the boring apartment buildings that littered E12 just past the hotels that surrounded Ashwood St's terminus. Personally, I found the lack of tiered architecture and its labyrinthine qualities made me feel somewhat exposed, but admittedly it made hunting vampires easier from the look of things. They wouldn't be able to escape to other buildings without descending to street level, and the cops had taken advantage of this by placing police cruisers at equal distances around the building and settling in to wait for the heroes.

Eventually, three heroes showed up. Ferrosa, Hydrox, and the flying super from earlier who I now knew was called Avos. They spoke briefly with some of the police, then Ferrosa and Hydrox entered the building while Avos flew along the outside, seemingly tracking their progress. Their strategy soon became apparent, as a vampire burst through one of the windows and tried to escape to the street, using its wings to break its fall. Avos quickly caught that one with telekinesis, before sending it hurtling to the ground, it's fragile wings bent out of shape. It smashed into the pavement, then shuddered slightly as it died. This sequence of events repeated itself three more times over the course of the next ten minutes.

And then the heroes exited the building, talked to the police briefly, and left.

"Where's Buzzer?" asked Zaps.

"He's... probably holed up in some hidey-hole somewhere," said

Pebbles, "They probably missed him. He'll be out soon. Look, cops are going in."

Several officers entered, looking somewhat tense, but more confident now that the heroes had cleared out the building. Shortly, an ambulance arrived, and two paramedics followed the police into the building, only to exit quickly with a man in a wheelchair.

It wasn't Buzzer.

We waited longer, but it soon became apparent that Buzzer wasn't coming out. Some people in a black van a bit like ours showed up to deal with all the bodies, and the police started packing up and leaving in their patrol cars, until it was just one unit left. They were taking statements from a few civilians that had been brave enough to leave their homes. It was all rather casual, and somewhat frustrating for us, considering we could still hear Buzzer over the radio.

"...If I get out... gonna buy a whole evening with Amber, she's nice..."

"God fucking damn it!" said Pebbles, roughly. He started to get out of the van, "Useless fucking C's. One damn job..."

"Pebbles?"

"I'm going to go get him. Zaps, you're with me. Tofu, Mikey, stay with the van. If you think you see trouble, circle around the block away from it."

"Pebbles, I can find Buzzer," I offered.

"I need you to stick with Mikey. One power per group."

"Yes, but I can track Buzzer, so it would be better for Zaps to stay."

"I'd rather have you rookies out here where it's safer."

"The major threats have already been cleared from the building, and I have the ability to find Buzzer quickly. We go in, get Buzzer, and get out," and maybe grab a sample or two.

Pebbles sighed, and looked over at the building. The cops had finished with the civilians and were driving away, leaving the street to empty as people fled back into their homes or left to get to an emergency shelter. He rapped his knuckles on his helmet a few times before coming to a decision.

"Fine, fine. But if anyone asks, you waited in the van."

"Pebbles, Sandra will know if I-"

"Yeah yeah, shut it before I change my mind. Zaps, you're with Mikey then. Mikey, whatever you do, don't let Zaps drive."

"Aw, come on Pebbles. I promise I won't shock the van."

"I mean it. Tofu, let's get this show on the road."

I exited the van, leaving a disappointed Zaps and nervous Mikey behind, and walked with Pebbles to the building. The apartment we approached looked nearly identical to the one where the Espada had kept Jasper, down to the beige paint. I expected navigation to be easy.

We reached the entrance and found it locked, so Pebbles stood aside

and gestured for me to open it. At first, I tried to imitate Jasper's method of opening locked doors by slipping tendrils into the keyhole and trying to move the 'tumblers', but Pebbles' frustrated foot tapping convinced me to just brute force it (there was some kind of device blocking the tumblers anyways).

"So how are we doing this?" he asked as we entered.

"I'll track him by smell."

"Like one of those dogs in the movies?"

"Maybe? Hopefully not." The only dogs I'd seen in movies were the ones in 'The Thing', and those had gotten eaten, not tracked anything.

We scoured the first floor of the building, making sure to go by each entrance, and almost surprisingly, I picked up Buzzer's scent quickly.

"He came through here."

"Shoot, you can really smell him? You sure it's him?"

"Yes, I think he threw up. It's distinctive."

And it was, but I also smelled blood.

I tracked Buzzer from the entrance he used to a stairwell, and then up to the third floor. There were obvious signs of a fight here, and several doors had been pulled off their hinges. Looking past the caution tape put up by the police, we could see the inside apartments were a mess. One civilian poked their head out, but slammed their door closed again when they saw us. Our attempts to knock and

question them about what happened were met with only silence. I had to convince Pebbles to stop pounding on his door before the police were called again.

We searched through the rooms. From the sight and smell of it several civilians had made a stand here along with Buzzer. From the amount of blood I wouldn't be surprised if someone died, but we could still hear Buzzer on the radio, so we knew he had survived this encounter. We just couldn't find him.

I began slowly backtracking, searching for a trail that led away from the blob of scents that surrounded the destroyed apartments. Finally, I found an offshoot back on the first floor. It was lucky that Buzzer threw up, because I might not have found the trail he left over the nearly overpowering smells of blood, urine, and another oily substance that smelled strangely sweet. The odd thing was that this new trail didn't smell of Buzzer's blood, and it soon became apparent why when we reached the second entrance the trail led to. This entrance was destroyed, simply battered inwards, and outside was a scene of destruction. There was an overturned van in the street, and the building across the road had nearly all of its windows broken. We quickly retreated back into the building before one of the multiple cops still in the area could see us.

"We've been going backwards."

"What?"

"Buzzer's scent is weaker here than where we found the trail," and it lacked the smell of his blood. Buzzer must have gotten injured in the fight, although I didn't want to tell Pebbles that considering his mood. "He must have entered here, tried to barricade himself, then fled out the other entrance when the barricade failed.

"Makes sense I guess. If he came out here he'd be with the C's. Come

on, let's go back."

We backtracked through the building to where I originally found the scent. It led outside the building, and I found that all of the scents I picked up in the apartments were detectable out on the street. The trail went along distinctly until it abruptly stopped along an empty section of sidewalk.

"It stops here."

"What? But there's nothing... ah shit."

The trail led to a manhole cover.

"We better move quickly. Smells disappear fast down there." I moved to pick up the cover.

"Whoa, hold up Tofu. You aren't going down there."

"Why not?"

"Like I said earlier, senior members only. Sandra will rip my head off if I bring a rookie sewer diving."

"But how will you track Buzzer without me?"

"...Ah. Right. Ha... let me think a bit."

"Pebbles, are you alright? You are hesitating more than usual. Can I help in some way?"

"Jeez, the kid is worrying about me," he sighed to himself, "I'm fine Tofu, I'm just a bit on edge. Usually Buzzer is the one to handle the details."

"Ah. Then should I present my analysis of the situation?"

"...Pft, sure. Hit me with it."

"Buzzer is likely in the sewer. It's possible that he hid there of his own volition, but it is more likely that he and other civilians were kidnapped by the vampires to be used as rations. Thus, his rescue is time sensitive. I've been on multiple hunting trips into the sewers and am confident in my ability to navigate them unharmed, as well as deal with any organic life I come across. Furthermore, I-

"Alright alright, jeez. I get it *nerd*. You're channeling your inner Trebla."

"Pebbles, using 'nerd' and similar words in a derogatory fashion is to be avoided according to company policy."

"Good lord, they did a number on you. After we get Buzzer, remind me to sit you down and tell you about the things they *don't* teach you in that fufu class. But for now we got a bonehead to save."

Mikey drove the van over once Pebbles called the others on the radio. Pebbles needed to retrieve a few odds and ends from the van, including a metal 'baseball bat' and a small med kit. Zaps wanted to go with me instead, since he could 'zap those bugs into oblivion', but Pebbles denied him.

"One bonehead has to stick with the domino."

"So why don't you stay, and I'll go with Tofu?"

"You and Tofu... in the sewer together... unsupervised..."

Pebbles looked back and forth between Zaps and I. Several times.

"Nope."

"Ughhh, come onnnn, I want a turn," Zaps complained.

"Careful what you wish for Zaps," Pebbles responded.

I reconfigured my body into my preferred combat form while Pebbles prepared. So much easier and smoother with flexible chitin as my skeleton, and foldable muscle that stretched effortlessly. I just flexed a few muscles and my pieces reconfigured, almost no micro unit shifting required, which meant no wasted calories (wonderfully efficient). I was eager to give my new upgrades a trial run after the time spent training with them.

Pebbles confirmed he was ready, so I lifted the manhole cover, and climbed face first into the tunnel.

"Ah, over here. I picked up the trail."

The tunnels under E12 were about what I expected. We weren't far enough away from E13 for the local ecology to differ greatly, and the architecture was more or less the same unlike the surface, but what did make a difference was the *smell*. The scent of human waste was nearly overpowering, and made tracking difficult. I was forced to use alternate means, such as marks in the scum, or finding splatters of recently spilled blood.

I found it interesting that the overall smell of the sewer triggered a slight feeling of 'disgust' in me. Apparently this was another of Human.exe's pre-packaged 'instincts', because the feeling vanished as soon as I turned it off. It was no wonder Nicole was so desperate to ensure the nessies' survival; food wouldn't be nearly as tasty without them keeping the air fresh.

"Damn, how deep do you think they went?" asked Pebbles, looking down the vertical tunnel I'd found. This one had a spiraling, rusted metal staircase which descended into darkness. Likely a leftover from a cowl hideout judging by the strange iconography imprinted into the metal. I doubted public services would have bothered with artwork in a sewer.

"It's hard to say, but I doubt they went much deeper. My friend Nicole said she only ran into vampires in the upper levels, since the lower ones are too dangerous for them."

"Wonderful."

I went down first, using the concrete walls to support my weight more than the rusty staircase. Pebbles was likely threatening its weight capacity as it was, and the water dripping down the tunnel made footing precarious. Hopefully there wouldn't be too many other humans with Buzzer. They would likely insist on bringing them along when we left, which would be complicated if we were running.

We reached the bottom, and I continued leading the way. This tunnel was rough-hewn (more evidence of being a former lair), and intersected with several side corridors, most of which looked to be in decent repair. Some of the lights were even on, which meant I could easily see the blood smears that led down the hallway.

"Place gives me the creeps," said Pebbles.

"Yes, the lights bother me."

"The lights?"

"It means this lair still has power, which could mean traps, or malfunctioning gizmos."

"...Shit. You sure Buzzer's in there?"

"Yes. His scent is fresher here."

"Well, if there are traps or whatever, the vamps probably triggered them. Just, be careful alright?"

"Of course."

We advanced one room or hallway at a time, giving me time to check for tripwires, pressure plates, laser sensors, and a variety of other possible trap triggers I knew of from my time in the New Dawn Inc. laboratories. It was rather nerve-wracking, as I wasn't finding anything, which could mean there was nothing to find (likely), or there was and I simply wasn't skilled enough to see it (possible). After all, the scientists' goal technically hadn't been to kill me, only to train me, whereas a solitary villain would likely have little compunction about obliterating any intruder who wandered in. I couldn't rely on any traps having tells.

We made slow yet steady progress, and despite Pebbles' frustration with the pace, my paranoia eventually paid off. Following the trail through the facility led us to a large crack in the wall of a hallway. Through this crack was the beginnings of a subterranean cavern, the entrance of which held a large, ankle-high pool of water fed by multiple trickling cracks in the ceiling.

Strung just inside the entrance, low to the ground, was a tripwire.

"There's a trap here. Give me a moment."

Pebbles stepped back, and I started to analyze the trap. The wire itself was simply anchored to both sides of the crevice with innocuous screws, placed deep enough that they would hold when

someone tripped on the wire. The intended victim would then fall forward into the pool of water, which was electrified by an exposed cable under the water. There were no sparks or sounds to indicate the trap, so it was easy to picture someone stumbling over the wire in the low lighting, and falling into the electrified pool. Thankfully the eye modification I received from Nicole identified the danger easily.

It was odd.

"Pebbles, are vampires smart enough to make mechanical traps?"

"Pfft, they can barely figure out door knobs. They're more likely to knock a door down than turn the handle."

"Then there may be a master who triggered, like you suggested. This trap isn't part of the lair, it was made recently, and the trail leads right to it."

"Can you disarm it?"

"No, the pool of water is electrified by that cable. We'll need to find another way through."

"Think you could carry us over it?"

"I won't attempt it Pebbles. The ceiling is cracked and crumbling, and there's no guarantee we won't be attacked partway. It would be better to bypass the trap."

"Well, hold up. Maybe we can turn it off. If this place has power, whoever built it needed to steal from the grid. Let's try to find a circuit breaker or something."

We back-tracked through the lair, looking for anything that looked like a 'fuse box'. I simply scanned for anything highlighted in a purple chroma. We found a likely gizmo, and its maker, in what looked like a workshop.

"Oof, looks like we found the owner. Guess the vamps found him first," said Pebbles. Behind the main workbench was a 'mummified' corpse, crumbling apart from age. I was more concerned with the buzzing box attached to the wall. It had lights and switches, and what looked like a glass bulb filled with electrical discharges. It glowed purple even without my eye modifications. The gizmo was obviously what we were looking for, but it didn't look safe to touch. I was starting to regret not bringing Zaps.

"Would this be the fuse box we're looking for Pebbles?"

"Looks about right. This place has all the hallmarks of 'lonely tinker dude'. Thing about working with machines is you need power, so you steal it or find a work around. Nine times out of ten, you'll find a gizmo like this sucking power off the grid and boosting it or storing it or whatever. I'm kinda impressed it's still working to be honest. Normally these things fizzle out when their maker dies. Might need to come collect it later on."

"... So how do we turn it off?"

"Oh you just... um... hmm..."

We went over the buttons and switches together, trying to combine Pebbles' experience with cowls and my lessons with Nicole to come to an answer. It was difficult, as there were a multitude of switches, buttons, and levers, but no labels. Eventually though, we settled on two likely options.

"It's either the big red button, or the giant circuit switch wrapped in hazard colors."

"Or one of the many other options."

"Nah, this... one of these has gotta be it. And the big red button is probably a self-destruct so, you know, it's probably the big ass

switch."

I edged away from the device.

"I'm kidding Tofu."

"Oh... So you're going to try the switch?"

"Seems like the best option... hey, you regenerate right?"

"I'm not touching it."

"Kidding! I'm kidding... mostly... Right, no time like the present."

"Maybe we should get Zaps."

"No time for that. Here goes nothing!"

He grabbed the handle of the switch (practically a lever), and slammed it down. Personally, I would have just lowered it gently. Either way, it seemed the switch wasn't the correct option, as the gizmo didn't turn off. Instead, it started to hum louder.

"Ha. Well I guess it was the button then." He pressed the button.

Nothing happened, except for the electrical buzzing continuing to get louder.

"Well, heh, I mean why would you make the power switch some big clunky thing right? Gotta be one of these smaller ones. Maybe this one?... Nope. How about... huh."

"Pebbles, this doesn't seem safe."

"I know, I know. It's gotta be one of these though," he said, as he began flipping all of the smaller switches. None of them seemed to be the off switch, or in fact, do anything at all. The gizmo just kept making noise that sounded suspiciously like power building up. I recognized the sound from some of the devices in the garage back at

the HH base (and a few action movies). Pebbles kept flipping as many switches and pressing as many buttons as he could, but nothing stopped what sounded like a soon-to-be 'meltdown'. I'd witnessed one in person once, while passing through Socket's garage. A small gizmotec battery had melted through an engine block before exploding like a small grenade.

A small battery.

"*Pebbles!*"

"Yeah, I know, I know. Time for plan B."

He started running out of the room. I beat him out the door.

We ran down the hallway, the menacing hum of the gizmo following behind us. What lights were working were flickering on and off, and I could hear the tinkling of glass cases coming from one of the side rooms, the vibrations coming through the walls from the workroom rattling the brittle glass until it cracked. The worst part was the staircase we used to enter the lair; it was being vibrated along with the walls, and the entire metal structure had broken loose from its moorings and was banging against the sides of the tunnel. It created a terrible racket, and I doubted it would be usable even if it didn't shake itself to pieces.

"THROUGH HERE!" yelled Pebbles. He dashed into a side room where the walls looked thickest. It was empty except for a couch and broken television, and I took Pebbles' cue to huddle with him in an empty corner not facing the entrance. It seemed he expected the likely explosion and fireball from the gizmo to perhaps follow us down the hallways. An unsettling prospect, as an explosion capable of going all the way through the facility would likely be strong enough to just collapse it. Considering how badly the walls were

vibrating, that might still be a risk, even if nothing exploded.

Pebbles assumed a fetal position while protecting his head, and cursing. I started making a few internal modifications (mainly padding and reinforcing the area around my core) in case I needed to burrow my way free afterwards. Briefly, I considered trying to shield Pebbles from falling debris, but decided against it. He was tough enough to survive some falling rocks, and if he wasn't, I could use his corpse as a fuel source to help dig my way free.

"Just make the damn device! No bells and whistles! But noooo-" griped Pebbles.

The rumbling continued. Glass started to pop all over the facility from the vibrations.

*"Damn circuit-crossed egg-head tinkers can't make a damn **doorbell** without adding in a damned launch code!"*

The metal staircase was screeching as it rattled itself apart like a malfunctioning blender.

"*Goddamn summer trash tinkers and their goddamn-*"

The electrical buzzing whine rose to a fever pitch throughout the lair.

"*-Stupidfuckingnuclearpowered**bellends**!"*

BANG* *KERCHUNK

And then all the lights went out at once.

Soon followed by the lessening of the vibrations, which faded to nothing after several seconds.

And then silence... mostly.

"Buzzer damn well better be alive. Stupid vamps. Stupid C's. Stupid Trebla..." Pebbles was muttering to himself, still in the fetal position.

"Pebbles? Are you alright?"

"Mhm? Oh, yeah. I'm totally fine. In one piece and everything. Not psychologically scarred at all. Told you the switch turned the power off."

"I don't think-"

"Anyways, better get moving. Hopefully that cut the power to the trap."

Pebbles nonchalantly grabbed his baseball bat and medical bag from where he dropped them, took a moment to adjust the settings on his helmet (likely since it was pitch-black now), and headed out the door. I followed, stopping only long enough to assess the damage to our only exit. The stairs were trashed, and would in no way help our egress when we were done. I made a note that I would likely have to carry both Pebbles and Buzzer later. We returned back to the trapped pool, which I instantly noted was no longer electrified. Turning off the gizmo had worked.

"Crap, is it still electrified?" asked Pebbles. "I hear buzzing."

"That's not the pool."

"Then... oh."

Vampires. I could hear their buzzing whine coming from past the pool of water. It sounded like a lot of them.

Pebbles let out a slow breath, "That... sounds like a lot of 'em. You sure you're up for this? Probably our last chance to turn around."

"Yes. This scenario is what I expected."

"Ugh, do me a favor and don't mention scenarios. If I never see another of Trebla's pamphlets it'll be too soon."

That was a shame. I thought Trebla's bank heist was masterful in how it accounted for all known factors and many unknown ones. I still kept a copy of it in memory.

Continuing forward, the crevice opened into a proper tunnel, the walls jagged and rough except where the dripping water had worn them smooth. Partway through there was even a stalactite, just like the caves in video games, and I stopped to take a picture with my cell phone so I could show it to my friends later.

The pool of water ended halfway through the tunnel. A lip of stone rose from the floor just enough to keep it contained, and the runoff traveled down a groove along the floor of the tunnel, which sloped gently downwards. Pebbles and I followed the water down, until the tunnel opened into a much wider chamber with a low ceiling. This area showed signs of being carved; claw marks covered many of the surfaces, but mostly the floor. Artificial grooves guided the trickle of water along the sides of the chamber, funneling into several shallow troughs dug along the edges.

Inside the water were eggs.

"Can you see them?" asked Pebbles, "It sounds like there's hundreds."

"It's the acoustics. The room is modified to amplify them."

"Then where is it coming from?"

"It looks like there are other tunnels intersecting here. I count three more, but the walls are irregular, there might be more."

We nearly made it to the center of the room (the perfect spot for an ambush) before I detected the first vampire. I whipped my right hand up to the low ceiling where it was hiding, and sank traction claws into its carapace.

EEEEeeEEEeeEEEEeEEeeeEEEEE****

Immediately it went into a frenzy, attempting to lash out at me, but being attached to the ceiling it didn't have the angle it needed. It let go of the rock in an attempt to fall on me, but I just used its momentum and my handhold to smash it into the stone floor head first, killing it instantly.

"*Jesus!*" cried Pebbles, not expecting the sudden movement. Three more shapes dropped from the ceiling ahead of us and charged.

The first one just ran at me with its arms wide, attempting to grapple me and let its allies flank, but I kicked out with my leg and swept its feet. Surprised by my extendable reach, the vampire wasn't prepared for the kick and fell sideways when my foot shattered its knee. I stomped to break its neck, then kicked the corpse at the second vampire approaching on my right, knocking it to the ground.

The third vampire was intercepted by Pebbles, who swung his bat at it before it could reach me. It reacted quickly, stopping and jumping away from the swing unharmed, having correctly estimated the range of Pebbles' weapon. They started circling, and looked fairly even as

they traded feints, so I spat one of my metal slugs at the vampire. It hit the side of its hip and unexpectedly cracked through the chitin, destroying the vampire's mobility. Pebbles took advantage and got a good hit that knocked it over, before beginning a one-sided beatdown, so I turned my attention back to the vampire I knocked over.

This last one didn't approach, more cautious now that it no longer had the advantage of numbers. Instead of attacking, it fanned its gossamer wings and flaped them quickly, producing the thin whine that I presumed was a form of communication (it certainly couldn't talk, not with that proboscis in place of a mouth). Once again I spat a slug, which hit it in one of its large, compound eyes. It punctured straight through, and likely bounced around the inside of its skull considering how fast it dropped. Since Pebbles was successfully finishing up with his vampire, I took a moment to examine the corpse. This was my first time seeing them up close, and I found them fascinating.

It was humanoid, but the features of its insect heritage were obvious. Head, thorax, and abdomen for a body. Antennae, compound eyes, and proboscis for a face. Six limbs, two legs and four arms, two wings, and of course the exoskeleton that enclosed the entire body. Taxonomically it fit the description of an insect, but aesthetically is where things got interesting.

The antennae draped down over the front of its face together, creating what looked like the bridge of a nose. Its compound eyes were ovals on the sides of its face, but curved around to the front to create a semblance of human binocular vision. Where a mouth should be was a proboscis with a sharp syringe shape at its tip, but it looked like it could withdraw into the head, and the chitin around the opening was shaped to give the impression of lips.

The head and thorax were shaped somewhat like a human's head and

torso and placed correctly, but the abdomen was odd. It hung off the back of its thorax, around where a human's butt would be, but appeared to be almost squashed flat, and wrapped partly around the waist.

As for its limbs, they imitated a human's almost perfectly. The main arms were attached at the shoulders, the legs attached at the bottom of the torso, and both bent in the correct directions to mimic a human's. Its hands even had four fingers and a thumb (although it only had two toes). The two extra arms seemed almost vestigial (perhaps used only for fine manipulation?), and were held close to its chest, the hands curved to give the vague impression of female mammary glands. Finally, its wings were too small to sustain flight, but I assumed vampires had at some point traded the ability to fly for stronger bodies and the ability to communicate with sound.

I was intrigued. There was so much *depth* to this design. Combat capable, but every piece designed to give the impression of a human female. I could easily picture humans being tricked into thinking it was a woman in the dim lighting of E13's alleys and sidestreets, which was in line with what I knew of its hunting patterns. Heck, when I picked up the corpse and held it in a standing position, the wings and abdomen draped around it in a way that looked a little like a dress. A small, underdressed, mutant woman out alone would be an irresistible target for many of Fortress City's criminal elements, for a variety of reasons. A perfect lure for an ambush predator.

This was an organism whose sole purpose was to hunt humans. Most organisms I'd come across weren't adverse to eating human, but this one was designed to do nothing but. The species had elevated itself from the tiny parasitic 'mosquito' it once was, and now was a full on predator of the human species, using mimicry and deceit to prey upon them.

I had to admire it.

I stabbed a tendril into its side to begin harvesting biological samples. Interestingly, the inside was all organs and liquid. I was expecting at least a muscular structure like with Nicole, but it was completely exoskeletal. Impressive that it could move the human-like hands and limbs with fluid pressure alone. I estimated its overall strength at perhaps one-point-five, maybe twice the strength of an average human of the same size. The fluid itself was... hmm, it tasted like-

"Tofu, please don't eat that."

"W-what?! I wasn't!" I quickly dropped the corpse.

"Cause that'd be super creepy. Its a far cry from an octopus."

"I was just examining it! For weaknesses!"

"Although I guess it would kinda be poetic justice if you did... eh, just stop eating food off the floor rookie. I don't know what they taught you in that lab of yours, but this is a sewer, you don't know where that's been."

"A-alright."

Pebbles just shook his head, then pointed to the tunnels ahead with his bat. "Let's get a move on before more of those things show up. You still got that trail?"

"Yes."

"Lead the way then."

I followed Buzzer's trail down one of the new tunnels. The scent was thin, but there had been other victims with Buzzer, and the scent of their blood was growing stronger over the smell of oily sweetness (which turned out to be the smell of vampire blood). The tunnel we were in widened a bit, and had multiple stalactites hanging from the

ceiling, but I also heard a steady vampire whine somewhere further down, so I didn't risk stopping for a picture. The sound the vampire was giving off was odd, as it didn't vary in tone, instead just continuing on and on without stopping.

"There is a vampire somewhere ahead. Its doing something strange."

"Well let's kill it and hurry. Buzzer's coming in loud and clear on the radio, so he has to be close."

I moved a bit ahead of Pebbles, stalking the noise from the vampire. The consistent sound allowed me to track it despite the cacophonous echoes, and I quickly zeroed in on a rock outcropping that hid the source of the noise. Then I heard Buzzer.

"Feels like they're closing in on me... can't really tell."

My radio wasn't on. The sound of his voice was coming from where the vampire was, which immediately put me on alert. Another trap? Buzzer had been mumbling into his radio the entire time we'd been tracking him, and Pebbles had been monitoring it. Could the vampires be using him as bait? Or the 'master' controlling them? But how would they have known we'd come for Buzzer? Maybe they expected to catch a hero with this trick? That would be in-line with a villian expecting heroes to pursue.

"Buzzer!" exclaimed Pebbles, having heard his friend's voice. He moved to walk past me, but I put out my arm to stop him.

"It might be a trap, I hear a vampire with him."

Apparently I picked the wrong thing to say, because Pebbles shoved past me and ran for the rocks that obscured Buzzer. Exasperating, but I suppose if he was going to spring the trap for me, it simplified my plan of action.

I followed quickly, but kept a decent distance, rapidly scanning every crevice and hole that might conceal ambushers or booby traps. Despite my caution I detected nothing, right up until Pebbles rounded the rocks with his bat held high, ready to swing at the vampire that held Buzzer. The moment he did, a sonic screech blasted out, the discordant frequencies designed to harmfully vibrate vulnerable tissue. Without our helmets it would likely have shattered our eardrums and ruptured capillaries. All-in-all it wasn't as bad as a banshee screech, but in normal humans would have still destroyed their sense of balance.

"Ah fucking christ!" yelled Pebbles, dropping his bat and grabbing the sides of his helmet as if he could cover his ears. Immediately the sound cut out.

"Satan's frosted ass, is that really you Pebbles?"

"Fucking right it is! Goddamn that smarts. Where's the damn vampire?"

"By God, winter musta come early. I thought I bit the big one for sure. I've been trying to reach someone on the radio forever."

"Aw jeez man, you're a mess," said Pebbles, noticing the state Buzzer was in and swinging his pack around to get the medkit. There was dried blood running down Buzzer's shoulder from a wound near his collar bone. He wasn't wearing his suit, and had bunched up the neckline of his glaringly orange prison jumpsuit to staunch the flow of blood best he could. I found it interesting the C's took the suit, but not his mask. Some illogical law most likely.

"Damn things busted my helmet with all their screeching. I didn't know... didn't know if I was getting through or not," huffed Buzzer.

"Hey man keep it steady, we're here now. Tofu keep a lookout, I need to patch him up before we move him."

"Been making vampire noises to keep them off me. Seems to confuse the dumb bugs somewhat. At least they didn't finish eating me like the other poor sobs... Honestly thought I might not make it this time."

"Hey, hey screw that talk. I wasn't gonna give up on you. You know that. You're... you're my best friend man. This job wouldn't be the same if I didn't have you around to watch my ass."

"... Hey Pebbles, just so you know, I blew out my eardrums a while back, so if you're saying something I ain't heard shit- **ow!** Watch that stapler you cock-mongler!"

Pebbles continued treating Buzzer's wound, using antibacterial gel and a small handheld device to suture the wound. I explored the immediate area, making sure there weren't any surprises. Fortunately, it seemed that there wasn't any dangerous trap set for us by the vampires, the noise had just been Buzzer. Unfortunately, Buzzer's surprised use of his power upon seeing Pebbles seemed to have alerted the nest.

Six vampires came streaming into the tunnel from the egg chamber, immediately charging me. The first attempted the ill-fated grappling maneuver its fellow vampire tried earlier, but instead of repeating my defense I decided to try something new (I needed to do some testing).

As it closed in I threw a straight punch. It underestimated my reach and took my punch right in the chest. Weak chitin gave way, and my fist sank into its torso and nearly came out its back. Its charge was immediately halted as it died.

The next two vampires tried to flank me using their dead comrade as a distraction. I just shoved the dead body at one of them like a shield,

and lashed out at the other one's head with my free hand. It tried to dodge, but I just flexed a muscle and my arm curved like a tendril to smack my palm into its face. Then I crushed, destroying its face, and most of its head.

The vampire I was blocking with the corpse grew irritated and made the highly irrational choice of trying to climb onto and over the corpse I was holding. The muscles up and down my arm rippled, and suddenly my arm extended, completing the journey through the corpse and catching the vampire around the neck. Then my muscles rippled again and contracted, pulling both the corpse and vampire towards me. I lifted both bodies up over my head, then brought the entire ensemble down on top of the next charging vampire, crushing it. It didn't kill it, but the head of the vampire I was holding by the neck popped off, unable to take the strain.

The final two vampires halted and backed away, justifiably cautious as four of their number were suddenly dead or dying. Both began making the whine with their wings, likely calling more vampires, but I ignored them. If I thought they could swarm me to death I would never have come down here. Rats, Espada minions, stitched monsters; I'd been dealing with swarms near constantly since my escape, and it was time to put my countermeasures to the test.

I turned my attention to the crumpled vampire in front of me. A quick stab through its eye with a knife destroyed its brain, killing it, and then I tore a few holes in its carapace to get at the insides. After a quick check to make sure Pebbles and Buzzer were still behind the rocks, I opened the jaw plate of my mask, and began to eat. Technically it wasn't necessary to eat like this (I could just absorb what I needed with micro-units), but the vampires were smarter than Pebbles gave them credit for, and I wanted them to understand exactly where I stood in relation to them.

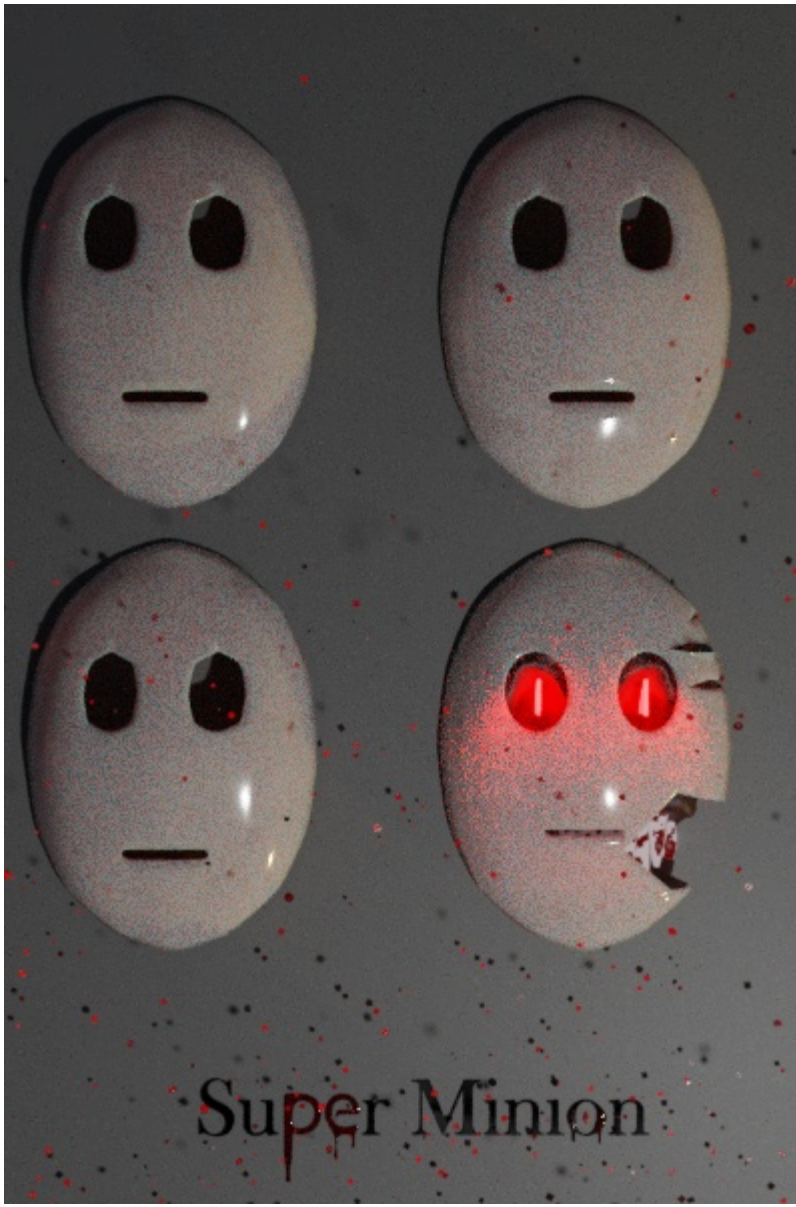
Initial analysis of vampire combat abilities complete.

All risk factors within acceptable parameters.

Assigning vampires new designation: prey.

A note from Gogglesbear

And in fan submissions we have some cool artwork by randomguy84, and a song by Angry Spider. I think the two actually go pretty well together. Very spooky, just in time for October.


Super Minion

Ch47 Meatball With A Chance Of Lightning

Vampire blood is surprisingly sweet. Also very oily, likely because it serves a dual purpose as a sort of organic hydraulic fluid. I'd have to experiment with it more later; I wasn't about to shift to a new blood type in the middle of a combat situation, but I definitely saw potential.

"Hey Tofu, what was that noise?" asked Pebbles, from behind the rocks.

"Nothing! Just some vampires," I replied, while hurriedly cleaning off my face.

"You need any help?"

"I'm fine. Is Buzzer ready to move?"

"Yeah, he's not leaking anymore at least."

I heard a bit of scuffling, before Pebbles came around the rocks, supporting a slightly limping Buzzer.

"Whoa, what happened here?" asked Pebbles, taking in the scene. Then he looked ahead and spotted the two surviving vampires, "Uh, Tofu? Vamps."

"I know, but they refuse to get close, so we should be safe for now. We should try to get as far as we can before more come though."

"Crimeny, what happened here? Oh hey there Tofu," said Buzzer, who couldn't follow our conversation with his damaged eardrums. "Hey Pebbles, ten bucks says he eats some of this."

"No deal."

"... I didn't hear a no."

We made our way back through the tunnel, the two vampires retreating ahead of us, but not leaving. They were definitely going to try at least one more time, likely with an ambush at the egg chamber. It was the best place to take advantage of their numbers.

"Pebbles, I suspect the vampires will try to surround us at the egg chamber."

"Yeah, it's kinda looking that way. Think we can force our way past them?"

"Perhaps, but it will be difficult while protecting Buzzer. If there are too many it could go badly."

"You can count on the too many part. If anything could get them to swarm us, it would be those eggs."

"The eggs?"

"Oh yeah. Vamps are a bunch of cowards, but they'll still defend the eggs. Never actually seen so many in one spot before either."

"Ah, then I might have an idea."

I explained my plan to Pebbles, and eventually managed to convey the plan to Buzzer as well by bending my fingers into letters. For some reason, he didn't seem to like that.

"Oh my god, I swear I can hear bones snapping. I'm deaf and I can hear it. Cut it out, I get it already!" exclaimed Buzzer, incorrectly. My fingers were completely silent as I popped them back into place.

I marched ahead of Pebbles and Buzzer, forcing the vampires to put more distance between us. The two of them had stayed ahead of us the entire time, nervously fanning their wings and ducking behind whatever poor cover the linear tunnel could give. When we reached the egg chamber they both disappeared around opposite corners and went silent. Blatantly an ambush, but there wasn't much we could do about it since they were in our path.

I reached the tunnel opening myself, and gave the room a quick scan. The vampires were nearly out of sight, hidden on the ceiling or along the irregular walls, but here or there a wing or limb poked out. I was able to count at least a dozen from my position.

It was the worst ambush I'd ever seen, and that included the random muggers who sometimes tried to jump me. I knew the vampires were capable of hiding better than this; the ones I killed on our way in hid just fine. Even the fact that I had no choice but to enter the trap wasn't properly implemented into this ambush. They should have continued leading me with the initial two vampires to distract my attention, then have the others come from behind to surprise me with numbers. If it worked (it wouldn't), it would have minimized their losses.

Vampires weren't this dumb. Which meant there was a danger I wasn't seeing. Again. Bleh.

Perhaps one of the vampires had a power? Improbable, but not impossible. Maybe there were mutants, or a specialized soldier caste whose abilities could make use of this scenario to their advantage. Or it could simply be that they had a human master who was controlling them, and mishandling them much like the late rat-stitcher had once

mis-handled his own minions.

A wide variety of possibilities. Frustrating. If this situation went badly, I'd be forced to run for it, and leave Pebbles and Buzzer behind.

Oh well. First things first: take the initiative away from the vampires.

Rather than enter the chamber proper, I moved to the side along the wall. A trough filled with water ringed the entire room, deceptively deep, inside of which were eggs, larva, and multiple dead bodies. Apparently the adult vampires dumped the drained victims in with the eggs, to give sustenance to the young. I grabbed one of these larvae and pulled it out of the water.

The vampires didn't like that. A susurration of wings swept the cavern as the vampires reacted, but kept their positions.

The larva wriggled in my grip. It was segmented, with little flukes that likely helped it to maneuver underwater. The head was rather large in comparison to the rest of its body, in order to support the musculature needed to chew dessicated corpses. It had an impressive number of teeth for such a small thing.

I crushed it. Its shriek cut off abruptly before it popped and died. Then I grabbed another from the pool and killed that one as well.

The vampires were definitely reacting now. Their angry whine

echoed around the chamber, all pretense of an ambush completely ruined. They started moving.

Next I grabbed a handful of eggs. Translucent and a bit slimy, I somewhat wondered if I could save a few for later to see how they cooked. Fresh chicken eggs were so expensive, and I'd been using the powdered variety so far. Maybe with some ketc-

BANG

Something **slammed** into my helmet, jarring my head, and ricocheted into the ceiling. Instantly I ducked low, presenting a smaller profile, and calculated the vector. That had been a *gunshot!* Two more shots rang out, one of them hitting me in the shoulder, but not managing to penetrate my suit. I charged in the direction of the shooter, zeroing in with the help of the muzzle flash.

Vampires were emerging from all over now, no longer content to bide their time, and several ran to block my path. I lashed out, quickly breaking legs, joints, necks, anything that would disable them for me to slip past. Eventually though, I was forced to stop when a veritable wall of bodies blocked my way, but not before I caught a glimpse of the shooter. It was a normal vampire, no different than any of the dozens of others, holding a large automatic pistol in a double handed grip with its secondary hands. So they *were* smart enough to use tools.

I switched priorities now that I understood the threat. The gun was a concern, but I had my suit and helmet. Somewhat more pressing was the sheer number of vampires. I saw at least thirty-nine, with likely more out of line-of-sight, although I couldn't be certain. The droning whine that now filled the cavern was even more deafening than the

gunshots, and using sound to gather information was basically useless. I was definitely going to be able to put my anti-swarm tactics into practice.

First countermeasure: I needed to put my back to the nearest wall to limit vectors of attack. Easily done (after shoving a few vampires out of my way), although I'd need to be aware of the water trough when it came to footing. Next, I'd need more fuel. Also easily acquired as the next batch of vampires rushed me. Five of them came at me from the crowd, spacing themselves equally in a semi-circle around me. I unlocked joints in my arm and struck with a whiplike motion, catching all five of them with a strike that I'd tested on concrete. Traction claws tore through weak chitin using brute force more than anything, and three of the vampires died while the final two fell to the floor, critically wounded. Several vampires tried to jump in past the swing, only to then die as my other arm came around and caught them instead. In essence, I was simply flailing my arms at full force, highly inefficient both in energy spent and precision, yet, strangely effective. The imprecise movements had the benefit of being unpredictable, and putting as much force as possible into the blows meant even a glancing hit could break necks and shatter carapace. Still, moving this much muscle this quickly was energy intensive, which meant I needed to move on to the next phase.

I stabbed a foot through one of the fresh corpses, immediately extending spikes into the innards and discharging micro units which immediately went to work. Normally I would never begin harvesting in the middle of combat unless it was an emergency, but this would both keep me topped off while I kept the horde back, and would set the stage for the next phase of my plan. Inside the corpse, my micro units harvested resources, and began converting biomass.

I was going to need tendrils. Lots and lots of tendrils.

I continued flailing, slowly creating a small field of corpses and loose limbs around me. Vampires continued to filter into the cave to bolster their numbers, and the swarms' attempts to overwhelm me increased. Besides just physical bodies, they also tried to overwhelm me with sound, using the vibrations of their wings in concert to create an ultrasonic attack much like Buzzer's. It was uncomfortable, but nowhere near as bad as a banshee scream. Then they tried to kill me with bullets again. It turned out there were actually two vampires with guns in the crowd, and they had frighteningly good aim. Socket's equipment proved its worth several times over, as bullets bounced off my helmet and failed to penetrate my suit.

The breaking point of the fight came after I'd killed twenty-five of the vampires. They stopped advancing, and nervously milled around as they hesitated over how to proceed. It seemed I'd hit their breaking point for risk and return. Quite the difference from humans, who would have either broken much earlier in panic, or would have gone into a 'bloodlust' and refused to retreat until a much larger percentage of the group was dead. Vampires were normally solitary hunters, and were more aware of the individual risk they each faced. Now that their strategies had proven ineffective, they were far more willing to cut their losses and run. But, I needed them to stay a *little* bit longer.

I started rapidly crushing eggs and stabbing larva, making sure to pull some from the pool so that their screeches echoed. If the vampires retreated, they'd lose multiple nests worth of young, practically an entire generation. Considering the difficulty of acquiring their main food source, it wasn't something they could easily replace.

Their reaction was immediate.

The swarm moved forward as one, using the last desperate tactic available to them, and the next lash of my arm crushed through four vampires before being stopped by the sheer press of bodies. Multiple clawed hands latched on to prevent me from moving, and despite grievous losses on their end, both of my arms were quickly suppressed under grasping vampire bodies. I felt multiple bites prick me as the rest of the swarm charged my main body.

That's when the dozens of corpses beneath them popped open, and hundreds of tentacles sprang forth.

I'd converted the surrounding corpses into a field of grasping traps, all connected to the original corpse I'd stepped in; they'd been too focused on my wild flailing to notice the thin tendrils radiating outward across the floor. Now almost half the swarm was stuck grappling with thick octopus like tentacles and cable like tendrils, all composed of foldable muscle. Tentacles and tendrils attached to torsos and looped around limbs, pulling vampires deeper into the melee and then constricting to break chitin and expose their innards to thinner, micro unit injecting tendrils. Even before they finished dying, their bodies became fuel for the traps. Still, I tried to make it as quick as possible, so as not to risk the chance of a trigger.

Over the next minute, I monitored the results of my plan. Drawing them in had gone well, the bites I received in return proving to be a non-factor as they had the same difficulty in draining me that Sanguine once had. The blood they drank deconstructed inside them, and the result seemed to bother them quite a bit, making freeing my arms easy. Any vampires directly over a corpse trap were caught and crushed to death by tendrils, but quite a few escaped, sometimes sacrificing limbs to do so. These predictably ran off as fast as possible, barely stopping to maybe grab an egg or larva before fleeing the cave. Somewhat sloppy of me to leave so many survivors, but I'd needed to sacrifice precision for speed. Effectiveness through inefficiency as it were. All totaled, I'd killed twenty-five vampires

during the opening fight, twenty-seven with grappler traps, and another fifteen through various crushings and the general chaoticness of the trap. About thirty or so slipped away, or hadn't gotten within range.

I shivered mentally. While successful, this plan represented almost two month's worth of operational resources. Grossly wasteful, although the vampire bodies provided the bulk of the necessary materials. This strategy was only made possible by the very thing it was meant to counter. Still, I'd like to avoid such situations in the future, even if I now had a safe counter to use on swarms. I was going to have to leave most of this biomass behind.

So much waste...

I quickly repaired my main body, allowing myself to bulk up my combat form a bit just in case; I still hadn't encountered whatever was causing the vampires to swarm. Once finished, I regretfully unhooked myself from the network of traps, and watched as over a thousand pounds of good biomass disintegrated into useless mush. Sigh. At least there were a few chunks of chitin and meat left over here and there. A result of not being able to properly disperse micro units in the rush. Maybe something would come along and make a meal of the scraps.

I left the former egg chamber behind, quickly retracing my path through the entrance tunnel. Soon I encountered a monotone vampire whine coming from two figures ahead of me. It seemed Pebbles and Buzzer had successfully snuck past the vampires while I distracted them. Buzzer's imitation vampire whine was apparently good enough to make the vampires ignore them. At least when there were bigger

threats to worry about.

"Hello Pebbles."

"Gah," exclaimed Pebbles, turning to me. Then he flinched at the looming appearance of my combat form, "You are way too quiet for how big you are, you know that?"

"That is by design."

"Well whatever works. How'd it go? We didn't stick around long after the fireworks started."

"It went very well. I was somewhat worried about possible special circumstances, but there were only regular vampires, and they aren't strong enough to put me at risk."

"Hah. Not strong enough for you? Careful with the flexing, the universe is listening and it likes to prove us wrong."

"...It is?"

"Hah, right, you and metaphors. No worries Tofu, I'm sure you can solve whatever it throws at you with some elbow grease."

"Where do I acquire elbow grease?"

He laughed, "Brute force Tofu. A strong back and a stiff upper lip. All you gotta do is be strong enough to take what the world throws at you."

"I would prefer foreknowledge of the situation and well planned countermeasures."

"Bah, if brute force isn't working, you're just not using enough of it."

Our climb through the sewers continued without problems, and Pebbles passed the time by trying to explain the metaphors he used. I

decided to take his advice with "a grain of salt."

"***Please*** tell me we're almost there," said Buzzer.

"I swear, if he wasn't already concussed I'd hit him," Pebbles said to me, "I wish I was the deaf one."

We were climbing the last ladder to the surface. No vampires had pursued us, so we were taking it slow to allow Buzzer to not strain himself. That of course hadn't stopped Buzzer from complaining. Pebbles climbed out first, followed by Buzzer. Before I could see out of the entrance, I already knew there was trouble from how both Pebbles and Buzzer were cursing.

"Well well well, what have we here?"

I didn't recognize that voice. Popping my head cautiously over the lip of the entrance, I quickly took in the situation. Mikey and Zaps were both in handcuffs, sitting on the curb next to the van, and between us and them were two heroes. One was Avos, the telekinetic hero from earlier, and the other was another hero I didn't recognize. He wore a green bodysuit with a white pentagon on the chest, and from his lack of armor and bulging muscles I thought it likely he had a strength increasing power.

"Alright, all of you out of there, and get down on the ground," said Avos.

"Hey, I know what this looks like, but we didn't-"

"Shut it. You're under arrest on suspicion of damaging Fortress City infrastructure. During a lockdown, I might add."

"What!? The hell we did! We were rescuing Buzzer after you bozos freaking *lost* him! We wouldn't even be here if- hey!" exclaimed Pebbles, as the cape in green grabbed his shoulder and easily forced him to the ground, cuffing him after. Definitely a strength power.

"Yeah yeah, you can explain to the judge how you aren't responsible for fifteen square blocks suddenly losing power, although that might be a bit difficult considering your zappy friend's rep. Until then I suggest you retain the right to remain silent."

"I didn't do nothing," said Zaps in the background.

"And I'm the wandergheist. Now I won't say it again, get out and on the ground."

I proceeded to exit the sewer, which prompted both Avos and the green suited hero to tense. My current appearance wasn't exactly non-threatening. After assuring them I would comply, and explaining to them that Buzzer was currently deaf and needed medical treatment, the three of us wound up in cuffs sitting next to Mikey and Zaps. Not exactly the way I wanted today to end up. I briefly considered killing the two heroes, but quickly discarded that idea. I didn't know enough about their powersets. Perhaps some of us could have escaped if we scattered, but they called in the arrest immediately, and backup was already on the way. Not to mention that Buzzer was still injured, and we didn't have a cowl with us, so any resistance on our part was equivalent to admitting guilt. We'd just need to rely on the lawyers to get us out. Not the worst situation, considering Buzzer was supposed to still be working with the sweeper team, and it was their fault they lost him so we had an excuse for being here.

...And I didn't think they had any proof we destroyed the gizmo in the sewer, the most likely culprit for the blackout.

"Can't believe this shabby treatment! I risked my neck to hunt these vamps, doing my part for the *community*, and look where it gets me. Could at least let the injured man, the goddamn *real hero* sit in the van, but noooo, let's put him on the cold hard street. Used to be there were heroes who served the community, instead of wrongfully accusing *honest citizens* who were just trying to help. And another thing!-"

"Does he ever shut up?" asked Avos.

"Not if he can help it," muttered Pebbles.

At least the fact that Buzzer was complaining meant his injuries couldn't be too bad. I was almost more worried about Mikey, who was very pale. Was he that worried about being arrested?

"Are you alright Mikey?"

"Uh, t-there's, um-" he pointed, his eyes going wide.

My head whipped in the direction he was staring, startling the two heroes who had been keeping a wary eye on me. In the direction Mikey stared, over by the manhole we'd used, was a vampire.

One vampire.

"The hell?!"

Both heroes snapped to attention and faced the threat. It stood there calmly, despite being wholly outnumbered.

"What's it doing?" asked Avos

"Who cares? Crush it," responded the green suited hero.

Avos lifted his hand. In response, the vampire unfolded its wings.

*eeeeeEEEEEEEEEE**EEEEEEEEEEE** ***BOOM****

The shockwave that emerged hit Avos head on, and blasted him back so violently that he was thrown nearly half a block away before hitting the ground and collapsing. Our entire group was also blown back from the point of impact, and only the green suited hero remained stationary. To his credit, he quickly sprang into action, trying to get to the vampire and stop it, but the vampire responded with another blast that hit the cape directly. At first he seemed unaffected, but when he tried to move, he staggered twice and fell over, bleeding from the ears, eyes, and nose. His sense of balance must have been destroyed by the direct hit of the ultrasonic blast.

He should have worn a full helmet.

I spat metal slugs at the vampire. Maybe killing it would improve our situation with the heroes? It was worth trying. Either way, I doubted the vampire would leave us alone after it was through with them. Hopefully I'd get a chance to dissect it afterwards. It's shockwave ability was obviously a power of some kind, and I wanted to see if it had any differences when compared to normal vampires. It was possible that I could... huh...

My slugs hit a barrier. About two feet from the vampire, a glimmering shield had popped into existence, deflecting my attack.

Two powers?... Time to leave.

I slipped my hands out of my cuffs, and moved towards my teammates. Pebbles was unaffected by the blast, Zaps was still trying to stand, but was animated, and Mikey was a bit scuffed, but was otherwise fine.

Buzzer wasn't moving, and Pebbles was already trying to help him. Somehow he'd removed his own cuffs.

"...He's breathing," said Pebbles, after checking Buzzer, "Tofu, get the others and bring the van around. Hurry."

I was already heading to them. Quickly ripping their cuffs off, I asked Mikey to start the van before turning back again for Buzzer. I intended to assist with moving Buzzer to the van, but got distracted when another blast exploded by the cape. The vampire had used its shockwave to knock the hero senseless again, and was using its shield power to flatten the hero against the street. Now it crouched over him with its proboscis extended and stabbing into the hero's neck. Blood flowed into the vampire, and its carapace began to bloat unnaturally. Rather than becoming deformed; however, it appeared to be taking on a semblance of muscle definition. As it drained the hero, it gained more and more muscle mass, as well as several feet of height.

I debated trying to shoot it while its shield was occupied, but I wasn't sure if my shots would kill it. It was obviously gaining the power of the downed super (something I was told *couldn't happen*), and it might already be strong enough to survive, or be able to use more than one

shield, or even have other powers it could draw upon. It was better to run, and I hesitated to draw its attention to us while we withdrew.

Zaps had no such compunction.

"**Fry, bitch!**"

Before I could stop him, Zaps extended his arms in the direction of the vampire, and two bolts of electricity burst forth from his gloved hands. One was intercepted by the vampire's shield, but the other curved around it and connected with the vampire's side, shocking it. The vampire convulsed in pain, spitting up some of its stolen blood, and began flapping its wings.

*eeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEE ***BOOM***

The shockwave went wild, smashing into the side of the apartment building. Most of the windows were already broken, but a cloud of debris and dust bloomed out of the dwelling that got hit. Zaps responded with two more bolts. Again the shield intercepted one, but the other bolt curved enough to bypass the shield, and the vampire took another shock. This time it braced before the impact, and its enhanced physique allowed it to endure the bolt even if it shuddered in pain. Its wings began vibrating as it lined up a shockwave on Zaps.

So I threw a car door at it.

Its shield intercepted my impromptu projectile, but Zaps let loose

with another two bolts at the same time, and both of them hit the vampire. Apparently its shield could only intercept one target at a time, and it was blown off its feet by the impact of dual bolts, tumbling behind a parked car.

"Zaps, Tofu, let's go!" yelled Pebbles.

"One sec! I think we got it," yelled Zaps.

I too wanted to confirm the target's death, but only because I didn't want it blasting the van when we turned our backs. Making sure to flank from a different angle than Zaps, I circled around the car behind which the vampire had landed.

* eeeeEEEEEE**EEEEEEEE** ***BOOM****

The car itself was hit with a shockwave, and it flipped end over end in my direction, forcing me to scramble out of the way.

"I got it, I got it!" yelled Zaps, unleashing two bolts that both missed. One was close enough to get intercepted by the vampire's shield, but the other grounded itself on a metal signpost near the target. Surprisingly, the vampire took this opportunity to leap away, smashing through one of the first floor windows of the adjacent building, and escaping into the apartment. After a while, it became apparent that it wasn't coming back.

"Hells yeah, showed that mosquito who's the boss! Up high Tofu!" said Zaps. He raised his hand in a high-five gesture. I was hesitant to reciprocate, as his hand was still crackling with electricity.

"Hey! Move it or lose it! We gotta go!" yelled Pebbles.

"What about the capes?" asked Zaps, completely forgetting about the high-five.

"Ah... damnit, if they're alive grab them too."

I walked over to check the unfortunate cape. Looking him over, he actually didn't look that bad (minus the blood leaking from his sensory organs), and when I checked for a pulse I found one. Perhaps his power included regeneration of some kind? The vampire drained what looked like several litres of blood, more than enough to kill the average human. If his power let him survive, that meant the vampire had copied his power, not stolen it.

I picked the hero up carefully, and made my way to the van while pondering the vampire's power. Was it possible that vampires really could steal powers by biting?... No, that didn't fit with their behavior. If each vampire was capable of stealing powers in the same manner, they would have quickly overwhelmed humanity. One swarm could overwhelm a super, whose power would get added to a minimum of one vampire, then along with the new powered vamp they would overwhelm more supers, continuing exponentially. This particular vampire must have just gotten lucky, and gained a power theft ability.

So lucky.

It would be nice if I was that lucky.

"PUT HIM DOWN! NOW!" yelled Magenta.

But not today it seemed. I started to place the hero back down.

"Central I've got multiple heroes down, powered minions at the scene. I need back-up, now!"

Wait, why would she need... oh.

I looked around at the general destruction. The broken cars, windows, road. The injured heroes, the multiple boneheads, myself in full combat form.

And not a vampire in sight.

"...I can explain?"

Ch48 Food Chain 2: Eclectic Bologna

"Hey, we didn't do any of this, honest!" yelled Zaps.

"I SAID PUT BRIARSTONE DOWN! NOW!" Magenta yelled at me, ignoring Zaps.

"I am complying," I quickly placed the green suited hero, 'Briarstone', down on the street.

"Now back away and get on the ground!"

I slowly backed up, moving closer to Zaps who was looking rather twitchy. He looked back and forth between the van and Magenta before getting to his knees. I was glad he did not decide to start a fight; this was a bad situation to get caught in, but it really hadn't been our fault, and the two heroes, Avos and 'Briarstone', could confirm that once they recovered. Trying to resist arrest at this point would only-

*eeeeeeeeEEEEEEE**EEEEEEEE** ***BOOM****

A shockwave burst from one of the apartment windows and hit Magenta dead center. Her forcefield flared, dispersing the blast and leaving her unharmed. The vampire had attacked her!

"More hostiles in the building! Move in!"

"Um, that was the-"

"***Lucha!***"

Whump

Before I could finish speaking, I was slammed in my midsection by a flying tackle. It propelled me across the street and into a parked car. I wasn't exactly sure how Suprex managed to sneak up on me, especially considering his costume was even more gaudy than normal. It was still pants, cape, and mask, but the colors had been switched around to mostly red, blue, and orange, and there were multi-colored glass gemstones set into a flame pattern around his mask.

"Ah fuck this!" yelled Zaps from outside my line of sight, followed by the crackling of two bolts, "Pebbles get out of here! We'll catch up!"

Well, I guess we were fighting then.

Suprex was still grappling my midsection, so I punched him in the face. My fist connected and his head rocked back, a little blood leaking from a split lip. That was odd, I was sure he had super strength.

"Interesting way to say hello mi amigo," said Suprex, spitting a little blood to the side. "Allow me to introduce myself."

"I already kno-"

He grabbed the front of my suit in a fist, and with both hands quickly lifted me over his head (definitely a strength power), before trying to toss me. My limbs bent down and latched onto the road, but the concrete crumbled under my fingers, and he launched me straight up into the air. Two stories, three, four... seven! Way too high!

ERROR!

Even with super strength, the angle was all wrong for the forces exerted. With the method he used to throw me, he would need to be ridiculously strong to throw my current weight this high, but I'd managed to hurt him with a simple punch. How exactly did his super strength work? Was it perhaps some form of telekinesis?

I reached the apex of my flight and began to fall, flailing and twisting to try and readjust my position. At this height, I was going to sustain damage regardless of how I landed, but it really depended on whether the durability and spring-like qualities of foldable muscle could compensate for the increased weight of foldable muscle. I was reasonably certain I could cushion the fall enough that I'd only break my arms and legs, and more or less certain that my core would survive the impact regardless of the damage my body sustained. I would need to thank Adder for her lesson on weight again. Above a certain weight threshold, a falling body would follow fluid dynamics, rather than just safely crumpling.

I fell, stretching my limbs out to their maximum extension below me to try and absorb as much of the coming impact as I could. The ground rose to meet me quickly, twenty more meters, ten more meters, five meters, but-

"***Castigo!***"

Just as I was about to hit the ground, Suprex lept at me from the side, intercepting my fall. I tried to bring one arm up to block, but he dodged, he twisted, phased through, I missed... huh?

ERROR! ERROR! ERROR!

Suprex's arm hit me just under the neck, in what I recognized as a 'clothesline' maneuver. Instantly I was hit to the side, all of my momentum transferred ninety degrees into a completely perpendicular direction-

ERROR!

-and I was blown across the street, through a window, and then through a concrete wall, finally coming to a stop embedded in someone's stand-alone plastic wardrobe.

Damage to left arm: fractured support bone, 10% muscle mass overstrained.

Damage to left leg: torn ligament, skin abrasions.

Damage to torso: 3 broken ribs, broken collar bone, musculature bruising...

The list of damaged organs and parts went on and on, but amazingly, I was still within acceptable combat condition. I'd fallen seven stories and then been thrown *through* a concrete wall, and yet all of the damage done was *minor*. Foldable muscle or no foldable muscle, I should have been a pile of half-liquified meat with chitin shards floating in it, but I'd be able to heal this damage in less than a minute. Still, dealing with Suprex's power was *confusing!* I did not want to continue such an unpredictable fight*at all*.

I extricated myself from the wardrobe, and headed for a door leading further into the apartment building. Zaps was just going to have to find his own way back, I wasn't risking myself in such an unpredictable situation.

"Oh? Still on your feet amigo?" asked Suprex, interrupting my getaway. He was standing in the hole my flight created in the wall. "Thought I tapped you a bit harder than that. Ready for round two?"

"I'm not fighting you!"

"Feel free to tap out whenever you want pequeño cráneo. I've got a free ticket to Panama with your name on it ready for you."

"...I don't want to go to Panama."

I threw some detritus from the broken wardrobe at Suprex and fled out of the room, my traction claws carving divots in the carpet. Through two more doors I found the main hallway for the building's ground floor, and started searching for one of the exits. I got about forty feet when a door on my left swung open violently, and Suprex came charging through with a shoulder charge. He smashed into me, and I bounced against the hallway wall.

"Actually, now that I think about it, you never did give me your name," mused Suprex, "I watched Trebla's little video, but your name was mysteriously absent from it. A good debut, but you forgot to announce your name at the end! Don't you know a luchador should announce their name **loud,** and **proud**, so the audience can **cheer** their name!?"

"...It's Tofu."

I spat a slug at his face (which he blocked by *catching* it), then swiped with a claw to create distance before continuing my run down the hall. I didn't get more than twenty feet when Suprex came crashing through a door on my *right*, feet first.

"***Patadas Voladoras!***"

His feet connected on my side with such force that I was sent flying through *another* wall, where I landed on the couch in some civilian's living room.

ERROR!

That hit from Suprex should have broken my spine on impact, but neither the attack nor my flight through a concrete wall left me with any injuries above a severe bruise.

"You use such dirty tactics señor Tofu. Spitting and clawing. You'd make a good rudo in the ring."

"How did you get ahead of me?"

"...You know, your banter really needs some work."

"I only just started practicing today," and it wasn't exactly at the top of my priorities right now.

What was troubling me now, was how Suprex kept getting ahead of me. Did he also have multiple powers? But his wiki entry hadn't made any mention of teleportation or super speed, only a mention for

his shows of strength, and that what he did have was called 'Ultimate Kayfabe' by his fans. Researching kayfabe had brought me down an endless linked chain of articles on different topics like acting, wrestling, and memes and stories I didn't understand. The best idea I had was that he had a multi-faceted power based upon the concept of 'not breaking character in a wrestling match'. This... somehow related to defying physics?

Whatever his power, it seemed running was no good. I took a combat stance.

"Oh? Are you ready to fight me then?"

"I don't understand how your super strength works. Please keep that in mind so that I don't accidentally kill you."

"Ha! So you *do* know how to banter!"

I ignored him and started throwing basic punches in the way that Adder taught me. Of the things I'd tried so far, my first punch was the only thing that had phased him even a little. Perhaps that was a clue. I started with jabs and feints from a distance to test him, as I wasn't willing to close in. Most of what he'd done so far had been grabs, and flashy moves I recognized from a few fighting arcade games and pictures in articles about 'pro wrestling', articles that I'd quickly disregarded as being useless to my combat advancement. Obviously I would have to go back and research pro wrestling in-depth. He was managing to dodge my punches while using what looked like ridiculously exaggerated motions, that nevertheless worked.

"What's this? The big scary monster practices boxing?"

"You aren't supposed to call people names. It's mean."

"Ah," he coughed, "Well then, excuse my poor choice of w- **oof**"

My punch connected, I'd managed to hit him in the stomach. The hit should have done nothing based on his displayed level of super strength, but he acted as if he took a punch from someone of equal strength.

Cough "Heh, that's quite the punch you have there niño."

"Please stop calling me names."

"...That wasn't an insult."

"Oh. I don't know spanish yet. I still need to finish reading my way through the english dictionary."

"Well you'll have plenty of time to learn in a cell."

He rushed forwards, and blocked one of my punches by sweeping his left arm up with deceptive strength. Then he tried to sweep a foot out from under me, but was far too slow to-

ERROR!

My foot slipped out from under me as he kicked my leg, my traction claws somehow failing to find any purchase. Then he grabbed my sides under my arms and started to pull me forwards. I stabilized myself by grabbing the floor with a free han-

ERROR!

My fingers slipped, and he pulled me forwards towards himself, before dropping and rolling backwards with me still in his grip.

"***Estacas!***"

I flipped over him, the force of his throw causing me to somersault forward and slam into the wall behind him while upside down. Again, only minor broken bones and bruises, but he kept thwarting my attempts at normal combat with his power.

Suprex rolled to his feet and approached me. I didn't bother righting myself, and started kicking with my feet instead. He dodged using his overly exaggerated style again, avoiding my kicks by centimeters.

So I extended knives.

I felt the blades connect, scoring multiple gouges along his torso, neck, face, and arm. Suprex burst into motion and swept both his arms up, catching both my legs and shoving them up and away so violently that my feet hit the ceiling. He backed off while breathing heavily, and clutching at his new wounds. I took the opportunity to right myself.

"Still with the dirty tricks, eh Tofu?"

"You cheat too."

"How dare you even suggest the notion."

"Then why are most of your wounds missing?" Most of the gouges I'd just carved were gone, only a cut on his cheek, a cut on his forearm, and a thin cut across one of his pectoral muscles was left.

"Because a hero can't quit before evil is vanquished."

He took a fighting pose with legs spread and both fists on the ground. Then he sprang forward unnaturally fast, and started hitting me with arm thrusts. Each hit felt unstoppable, unerringly landing on my torso and doing more damage than any of his other supernatural displays of strength.

ERROR! ERROR! ERROR!

I stopped trying to dodge or block the arm thrusts, and instead curled my arms around to his back before wrapping them around his torso. My knives and tendrils extended, and I attempted to stab him, choke him, and even dissolve him with micro units. *Something* had to get through his power.

"***AAAAAAAAAAH!***"

He roared as he attacked, not even trying to break my hold, and instead his arm thrusts picked up more speed, slamming into me like he was a machine. The wall behind me began to crack from the force (his attacks should have been punching *through* my torso by this point), and with one final thrust that vibrated my organs in their casings, the wall gave way, and I was hurled out into the apartment building's main lobby.

Which made no sense, since we'd been fighting next to a hallway.

"I'm confused."

"Understandable. My techniques are not for the likes of lesser men to comprehend."

"No, I meant your power. And wasn't that a sumo technique? I

thought you did lucha libre."

He shrugged, "Wrestling is wrestling."

Annoying, even his fighting style was inconsistent. I wasn't sure how to deal with a power that only allowed damage if you followed the user's own esoteric rules. Technically such a power should make its user unbeatable.

But Trebla had beaten him.

Both Trebla and I approached problems with logic, and a plan. True, he had a battlesuit, but physical strength didn't seem to be a reliable factor in this fight. Maybe lasers or force fields would make the difference? But I didn't have any of those available to me right now. Trebla was also human, where I was not, but if Trebla's solution relied on a human element, then Human.exe should be able to provide that, shouldn't it? The only other difference between us, perhaps the main difference, was that I was a minion, and he was a Villain.

And villains liked to banter. In Trebla's case, with a script.

"I believe it's about time we wrapped this up niño. It's been fun, but I have many more evil doers that need my attention today."

"Fool! I have not even *begun* to use a random percentage of my true power."

"...Did I hit your head a bit too hard there niño?"

"No, my helmet is really good. I'm referring to the fact that your predictions of winning are based upon false information about my overall combat ability. Even though it looks like you're winning, you're actually going to lose because I still have my secret move."

"¡Ay, caramba! I broke him."

"You've broken me multiple times. But I am not yet defeated due to a hidden reservoir of strength that was yet to be revealed."

I got to my feet, while being careful not to aggravate the wounds Suprex had just given me. My micro units healed the essential stuff, but I left all the superficial ones, making sure to display the injuries prominently. Not all of Suprex's wounds had healed, and there had to be a reason for that.

"Now I will demonstrate my secret move that I spent an entire week working on."

I took a combat stance and approached him.

"*Secret **punch!***"

I aimed a straight punch at his torso, extending my arm as if to take advantage of my variable range. He moved to block it, but at the last second I flexed the muscles in my arm and my punch curved upwards to hit him full in the face. His head whipped back at the blow.

"*Secret **punch!**Secret **punch!***"

My punches were landing! Not at the same level of strength as when I hit vampires, or practiced on concrete, but they were still *landing*. No impossible turnabouts. No errors. I continued pummeling him, and while some of the punches were deflected, the fight now seemed far more even. In fact, I was starting to push him back.

And then he caught my next two punches in his palms, holding my fists in a vice grip. Trying to pull my hands away caused more errors.

"It's not exactly a secret punch if I know it's coming, now is it? **Olé!**" Suprex twisted my arms in a circle and yanked, pulling me in with a motion that sent me flipping over his head.

"*SUPERSECRETSPECIALKICK!*" I contorted in midair, bringing the heel of my foot down in a hammer kick. It came down on his shoulder, causing no errors, but sent him sliding across the floor in a way that seemed rather dramatic (and not *quite* right for the angle). As he came to a stop, he rolled to his feet, favoring his newly injured shoulder.

"A good hit," Suprex admitted, "Seems I've been taking you too lightly. I'll have to pull out all the stops."

"Does that mean you have a secret move too?"

He grinned, "No tricks pequeño cráneo. Only eleven years of experience in the ring."

Well that hardly seemed fair. Still...

"That makes me the underdog, which means you have no hope of winning according to two hundred and twenty-seven separate media sources."

"Ha! Let's put that theory to the test, eh greenhorn?"

"*Secret **punch!***"

"***Lucha!***"

I started punching him again, but this time he deflected the majority of the punches, closing in rapidly (I guess the effectiveness *does* drop if the punch is not a secret), so I tried to surprise him with a "*Secret **kick!***" It almost looked like my roundhouse kick would hit him, but he jumped over it while striking a pose, his power compensating for the inefficiency of it. Trying to follow up with a swipe while he was in the air failed when he slapped the underside of my wrist, sending my arm high. His feet hit the floor and kicked off again.

"***Tornillo!***"

He *spun* as he came flying at me. It looked more impressive than functional, but came at me far too fast to dodge. His elbow came around and slammed into me, driving me to the floor with him atop me. We went rolling across the floor of the lobby, both of us trying to pin the other while yelling the names of our special moves while we slammed into furniture left and right. A wooden coffee table some civilian had set up in the lobby for ambience shattered, its attending chairs scattered to the corners of the room.

"*Super **grab!***"

"***Quebradora!***"

"*Amazing **flip!***"

"*El escorpión de la muerte!*"

"*Awesome **tackle!***"

"***Último vuelo de la golondrina de verano!***"

__BAM__

The two of us **slammed** into the front door of the lobby, somehow knocking the reinforced door off its hinges. It fell outwards, revealing the street where we originally started fighting. From my pinned position I could make out the general destruction, which looked worse than before. The situation bothered me. Not because of the property damage though.

Because I was *pinned!*

ERROR!

I tried to struggle, but my arms were trapped behind my back! It shouldn't have been possible! Somehow he'd twisted my arms in just the right way to make the joints lock, the muscles twisted around and around chitin bones that were already bent to their limit. I tried to dissolve some of the tangled mass with micro units and-

ERROR!

Infuriating!

"You said you didn't have any secret moves!"

"That wasn't a secret move."

"It *sounded* like one."

"A long name doesn't make a move secret, or special. Neither does adding 'super' in front of every kick and punch by the way."

"It works in video games..."

He rolled his eyes, "What makes a move special is that you put your whole heart into it. You would do well to remember that."

My whole heart?

"...Okay. *Super awesome amazing marvelous wonderful impressive...*"

"What did I *just* say?"

"*...superb superior first-rate brilliant unbelievable...*"

"Niño? Look, it was a good fight for a greenhorn, but you're only going to make things harder on yourself."

"*...PERFECT SUBLIME PEERLESS EXQUISITE SPLENDID...*"

"Niño- Tofu. I'm not kidding! We're in a lockdown. I'm willing to take it easy on you this time since you're a kid, but the legal penalties if you don't desist-"

"*...**MEGA COOL MONOLOGUE THAT BUYS TIME ULTIMATE HEART DISTRACTION ATTACK!***"

My suit opened, my back burst, and my ribcage shattered as my main

heart escaped its confines supported by dozens of flexible tendrils to attack his face.

"***Dios mío!***"

The assemblage slapped against his skull and latched on, and I made sure that the beating heart covered his vision. His hands left the pin to try and get it off, and suddenly my arms could move again, as if there had never been a problem at all. I quickly reversed all my limbs so that my back became my front, before extending an arm and grabbing some nearby furniture.

"***AND A CHAIR!***"

I slammed the wooden chair into the side of his head. It shattered into dozens of pieces, but also sent him careening off of me. He hit the floor with a thump and didn't move. Oops. I quickly checked to see if he was still breathing.

...He was, and his heartbeat was steady. I hadn't expected my attack to knock him out, just to get him off me. I knew chairs had some kind of significance to pro wrestling, considering how often they featured in video clips, but apparently they were some kind of anti-kayfabe weapon? Suprex had taken that hit hard, reacting much like a normal human would have, and it didn't seem like he was going to wake up any time soon.

...Unless he suddenly woke up when I least expected it. That happened a lot in movies.

I eyed Suprex warily, and rushed to get all my organs back into place. This had been a resource intensive fight. The extra energy I

stockpiled from the fight with the vampires was already used up, and I was burning into my reserves. Only about a few days worth so far, but still, it added up. At least it was worth it.

I'd won.

The thought filled me with elation. I managed to solve the mystery of Suprex's stupid esoteric power by using logic, and correctly interpreting human culture references. The last time I had solved such an abstract problem was back when I escaped from the lab, and the victory this time felt just as rewarding. Satisfaction, happiness, pride... and the strangest urge to lift my fist to the sky in victory? Maybe with some of Trebla's camera drones watching? Or a cheering crowd? That didn't seem right...

Resetting brain chemistry.

...There we go. Suprex's power must have some slight side-effects. What I really wanted was to get out of here. Now. There was a super brawl happening outside, and while this fight with Suprex might have been safe with his power preventing lethal blows, I didn't want to get into any more fights with supers while unprepared. Of course, what I wanted was unrelated to reality outside of Suprex's sphere of influence.

The lobby darkened as a figure blocked the broken entranceway, his seven-foot tall frame practically eclipsing the view of the street outside, made all the more impressive when you realized he was still in his human form.

"...uh, hello Brick."

He didn't bother to respond, merely giving the room a cursory scan as he entered. His eyes fell on Suprex at my feet, before snapping to glare at me.

"He alive?"

"Yes. Just unconscious."

"Then I'll make this easy on you."

He cocked his head from side to side, causing his neck to pop.

"Attacking a hero with malevolent intent is a five year minimum sentence. Interfering with a lockdown operation is a felony, as is destruction of Fortress City infrastructure for that matter. *Kill* a hero during lockdown and you're in a prison cell for life guaranteed, if they don't send you down to Panama as cannon fodder. Kill Suprex and I'll make sure you never get that far though, so I recommend not trying to take him hostage."

Then he started to pop his knuckles.

"Feel free to try and run though."

Ah. That was why people didn't like it when I popped my joints. It was the sound of a predator limbering up.

I dug traction claws into the carpet and launched myself away, heading for the main hallway.

__crack__

Behind me, Brick shifted into his own combat form and damaged the floor with his weight. He was large and rock-like, his skin now an amalgamation of various shades of gray. It looked like someone had taken cement and asphalt and mixed them into a sloppy humanoid mold. If he held still, he would be indistinguishable from a statue made of pieces of unpolished, interlocking stones.

But that illusion was shattered when he broke into a sprint. He could *move*. Every one of his steps covered a dozen feet, his arms and legs pumping in a perfect runner's form. His head sometimes hit the ceiling and carved shallow divots, but that did not slow him in the least. I stayed ahead of him despite this. Four legs was still better than two, and I ran using all four limbs. With my traction claws digging into the thin carpet, I was able to apply the full force of my modified limbs into each step, each footfall practically launching me forward as muscle and chitin-bone flexed and then snapped back into place. I had designed my limbs with escape in mind as well as combat, and unlike Suprex, Brick's power couldn't disregard physics in order to catch me.

Of course, he could just use regular physical interactions.

__crack__ *__fwwump__*

I *threw* myself out of the way in the nick of time, as a chunk of concrete Brick tore off a wall came zooming past my legs like a discus. It tore down the hall, shattering into shards as it skid off the walls and floor. Brick gained three dozen feet in an instant.

"*People live in this building!*"

"*Scanned and cleared bonehead! I can play with you all I want!*"

Damn. He had no reason to hold back.

I kept running, and soon ran out of straight hallway to run down. The hallway turned to the right at the upcoming corner, and rather than slow to turn I kicked off the walls to try and maintain what speed I could around the corner.

__BAM__

Brick ran *through* the corner.

"*You're breaking infrastructure!*"

"*Infrastructure applies to critical utilities, and destruction due to criminal activity!"* ***crack*** ***__BAM__*** Another piece of building narrowly missed me. *"So don't quote the law at **me**, asshole!*"

"*You shouldn't call people names!*"

I was staying ahead, but Brick had good aim, and with every piece of rubble he threw I was forced to slow just a bit more to avoid getting hit. He was timing the projectiles for whenever it might slow me down around a corner or block my access to an exit. I was basically running in a giant circle around the ground floor of the building.

But I wasn't stuck just yet. Coming up was one of the holes Suprex and I made in the building. If I could get outside, I'd have free room to both run and dodge, and Brick wouldn't be able to catch up to me. I just needed to get there.

I burned resources to increase my processing speed, and refresh muscle cells. Traction claws landed in the best positions I could calculate as I tried to eke out as much speed as possible to get there ahead of Brick. Efficiency and precision were key.

__crack__ *__fwump__*

As I was running, I'd been slowly edging to the left side of the hallway. When Brick threw his next projectile, I dodged to the right overly far so that I could touch the wall with my back feet, then use it as a springboard to leap to the left faster than normal, passing right through the door to the civilian apartment that Suprex originally hit me into. I passed back through the rooms, remembering the placement of objects and furniture and using that knowledge to continue running at top speed without tripping or stumbling. With a last burst of speed, I shot out through the hole in the wall.

Right as a purple forcefield came down on me like a hammer, snapping my spine and smashing me into the concrete. Damnit. I'd been caught just like the vampires they flushed out of buildings. This was... embarrassing.

"Gotcha you little cockroach!" exclaimed Magenta, as the forcefield around her hands quickly extended, creating two large, glove-like extensions that grabbed my torso. I struggled and punched at the

field, but was disappointed to find her forcefield easily held up against my upgraded punches despite being stretched thin to cocoon me. I was quickly engulfed up to my head.

"You aren't supposed to use slurs Magenta."

"I-*That's not what I meant!*"

"I'm suing."

"Y-you-"

"Calm down Magenta. He's just trying to rattle you," said Brick, leisurely emerging from the building, "What's the sitrep?"

"Er, Hydrox recovered Suprex and Briarstone, but Avos is still missing. Ferrosa has Zaps in custody, but the rest of the minions are still on the run, and we couldn't find whoever had the shockwave power. We have a call out for any available speedsters to try and intercept the van."

"That shockwave wasn't from one of ours, it was a vampire," I interjected.

"Oh please. Tell me another," replied Magenta.

"A powered vampire engaged us just before you showed up, while displaying anomalous properties. It's highly likely that the anomalous vampire is the cause of the swarms, which means they will continue until it is destroyed. I'm willing to give you valuable combat intelligence for several concessions."

"Like we'd really believe that load of tripe. You'd say anything to save your own hide you..."

Magenta's words trailed off as Brick raised his palm for silence, and favored me with a calculating stare.

"Central hasn't been able to determine the cause of the vampire swarms yet," said Brick, "If you have real intelligence, you're obligated to inform us by law."

"And I'm willing to provide that intelligence for concessions."

"You aren't in a position to bargain."

"Yes I am. The swarms present a large threat to civilians in particular, and my information will increase the odds of ending this lockdown safely and quickly by a respectable margin."

Brick frowned and crossed his arms, staring at me while he considered in silence. Finally, he spoke.

"...Say I believed you. What do you want?"

"For you to let me go."

"Denied."

"Ah. Then can you make Magenta stop squeezing me so tight?"

"No. I'd rather you not be able to pull off another disappearing act."

"But she's breaking the eggs in my pocket."

"...Why would you..." he stopped and shook his head, "Forget it. Magenta, get him to lock up. Make sure they know about his powerset. And if eggs means what I *think* it means, add a count of illegal trafficking of organics to the report."

She grinned, "Sure thing."

Brick lifted his hand to his ear, "Central, this is Brick. Be advised, current lockdown threat is possibly due to a singular powered vam-" *__thunk__*

Brick didn't get to finish his sentence, as a blurred form collided with him and sent him flying down the road, crashing over and *through* parked cars. Where Brick had just been standing was *another* super I'd never seen before, although I severely doubted this was another hero. Disregarding the attack on Brick, he was also dragging an unconscious Ferrosa by a metal ankle.

"Whew, look at him go. Durable sonofabitch ain't he?" said the man, speaking past a large cigar he was smoking. He was wearing a sleeveless black tactical vest that clashed terribly with a pair of normal, tan khaki shorts. On his head was a silver combat helmet, with the faceplate permanently removed (likely to allow for his sunglasses and cigar), and the letters HH carved into the temple. He scratched at his thin beard as he turned to Magenta and I.

"Well hello there sweet cheeks. Don't believe I've met you before. I see you've got one of my boys there. Mind letting him go?" he held up Ferrosa, "I'll trade you."

Magenta didn't seem to know how to react, surprised by the sudden displacement and replacement of her leader by the hostile super. After a moment, she startled into motion, transferring control of the forcefield holding me to her left hand as she reached to free Ferrosa with the other. The new arrival threw Ferrosa up over Magenta's head, surprising her, and then promptly disappeared with a loud **pop** of moving air-

__WHAM__

-before slamming into Magenta so quickly it looked like Imp's teleportation.

The force of the blow warped her forcefield, causing it to withdraw from me in order to consolidate and protect her. She was sent reeling

as it rippled like water, her flight path looping crazily as her ability to fly fought with the raw force transferred to her, eventually crashing her into the wall of the apartment building while Ferrosa and I both fell to the floor with tiny thuds.

"Goddamn, she's also a toughy," said the cowl, "Nice to see E13's still making them like they used to. If I knew we had new recruits like this I woulda' stopped by sooner."

"Um..."

"What, you're still here rookie? Your feet should have been beating a tune the moment they hit pavement! ***MARCH BONEHEAD!***"

I followed his order and ran.

"You aren't going anywhere!" yelled Magenta, extricating herself from the wall and flying to block off my escape.

"MAGENTA! Leave him! I need you here!" shouted Brick, as he loped back up the street. He yelled into his comm, "Central I've got eyes on Warhead, I need anti-kinetic powers here asap! Ferrosa is down, multiple minions fleeing the scene!... Yes, *Warhead*!...Well ***apparently not!***"

Ah, well that explained things a little. Warhead was the name of the Hellion's Henchmen cowl who got sent down to Panama, the one Cindy told me about. What he was doing in Fortress City was a mystery, but I wasn't about to question his help.

Brick's voice faded as I fled down the street. I was out of range for Brick or even Magenta to catch up now, but judging by Brick's

concern over Warhead, there would soon be more heroes arriving on the scene.

Which the first one did, ahead of me. It was Hydrox, and he was riding a miniature wave of water that rolled down the street.

"Hey! Stop right ther-"

*eeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE ***BOOM***

Glass and debris exploded out of a second story window between us, preceding the powered vampire, who walked into the newly made aperture with a dead human in its grip. The missing hero Avos.

It tossed the corpse of Avos into the street. Then eyed Hydrox and myself, as well as the super brawl behind me, while bits of debris began to circle around it. If I was keeping track correctly, it now had an ultrasonic blast, an automatic projectile deflector, super strength, possible regeneration, telekinesis, and was flight capable.

"...What the hell is that?!" asked Hydrox, in the brief moment of calm.

"...That's your job," I answered, not stopping. I dodged around his mini wave and continued down the street.

"H-hey!"

"*Try not to get bit!*"

Hydrox and the rest could deal with it. As for me, three super fights was more than enough for one day.

Sidedish #6 Impact

Mikey

"Here on the right. Right there."

Mikey pulled the van into the dingy alleyway. Following Pebbles' instructions, he'd driven them far past the nice hotels and apartment buildings that clustered around Ashwood St's terminus. The apartment buildings in this area of the sector looked not only drab and boring, but run down and not well cared for, revealing a truth that Mikey was far more familiar with. Past the veneer of lights and bustle around the Red Zone and Ashwood St, E12 was just like all the other outer sectors.

In other words, poor.

He brought the van to a stop in front of an open garage with two thugs waiting just inside. Once upon a time he would be doing his absolute best to avoid all eye contact with the two intimidating men, but after the past few weeks and the events of today, he couldn't care less. Even if he did care, seeing the two men jump when Pebbles slammed the door open and yelled orders at them would have put his fears to rest. After all, the thugs weren't wearing masks. Mikey was.

The two men quickly came over and carefully helped Pebbles move Buzzer into the building. Buzzer had woken up while they were driving, but had been uncharacteristically quiet for most of the ride, a fact that seemed to worry Pebbles far more than if Buzzer had just stayed unconscious. They disappeared into the darkened inner workings of the garage, and it was only when Pebbles exited the building twenty minutes later that Mikey realized he'd just been

sitting there clutching the steering wheel, while the engine idled.

Pebbles re-entered the van, "Oh good, you kept it running. Gotta say, that was some good-ass driving out there. You've got the makings of a real getaway driver in you."

Odd. It hadn't felt that way to Mikey. His beginner skills had barely felt up to the task, and if the roads hadn't been nearly empty he was sure he would have hit someone. Hell, he almost hit one of those flaming ghost cars he kept seeing.

The damn thing had honked at him.

"Hey, we gotta go move this van to someplace with shielding, away from here. I don't *think* anyone hit it with a tracker but you never really know, was quite the melee. You wanna drive the rest of the way? You've definitely earned it."

"Uh..."

Mikey blinked stupidly at Pebbles, somewhat realizing that he was supposed to answer, but his brain was taking an extended vacation right now.

"...Ah. Shoot. Deep breaths kid. Danger's over. Just breathe deep and let the adrenaline wear off."

At first Mikey was confused about what Pebbles was trying to say, but soon realized that he'd been clutching the steering wheel in a death grip. After prying his hands open, he got himself together

enough to switch to the passenger seat, and let Pebbles take the wheel.

"You wanna take a few minutes before we go? Or you could stay here with Buzzer if you aren't up for more driving."

"Um... nah. Nah I'm good. We can go."

"You sure? No shame in bowing out if you aren't feeling it. Best never to head out without your whole head in the game."

"Oh. Is hiding the van going to be risky?"

"Nah, but like, this whole escapade kinda proves how fast things can go belly up don't ya think?" replied Pebbles, making a swirling motion with his finger for emphasis.

Mikey huffed, "No kidding. 'Just go pick them up. It'll be quick. Oh and take Zaps!' "

"HA! That was your first mistake right there. Thank god you didn't let him drive. I've seen him crash a bike so hard it exploded."

"What? No way."

"Yup. Tried to supercharge one of those damn electric motor bikes. It worked at first, but it was *tinker made*, so when he crashed the thing going *fifty* the motor went up like a damn firework!"

Mikey laughed at that. Maybe a little harder than the story really warranted, but right now it really helped unravel the coil in his gut.

"Ahaha...heh... ahh, you know what? I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I mean, this isn't the first time something like this has

happened either. Might as well get used to it right?"

"Pfft, energy blasts and concrete flying over your head aren't something you're supposed to get used to," said Pebbles, pulling the van out of park and driving down the alley.

"You seem pretty used to it though."

"Ha! I rest my case."

They drove in silence for a while. True, Mikey could sometimes hear sirens and such in the distance, but Pebbles was an expert at knowing where and when to turn to avoid the prying eyes of the law, and with the roads almost empty had free reign to pull the van into whatever spot he needed. Perhaps dodging the cops wasn't exactly a skill to be proud of, but it was certainly paying dividends right now.

"How was Buzzer?" asked Mikey, mainly to get his mind off the topic of police.

"Mhm? Oh, he's fine. Bad concussion, but it'll heal. His damn helmet failed if you can believe it. Shock absorbers basically ground to dust because of all that screeching the vampires made. I swear, the only reason he's allowed to be a bonehead is because he'd have died a million times over without that mask."

"...Shouldn't we all have them then?"

"HA! You think these things grow on trees? This is supremo tinker tech right here, the kind you steal secret military parts to make. You won't find anything like it on any shelf on the continent. One-size-fits-all, collapsable, doubles as both a gas mask and light correction goggles, with climate control detection so smart, it knows when it's safe to open the mouthplate, and when it should just let you choke on your own vomit. All that, and it's still strong enough to take a full clip at point blank range from a semi-auto wielding dust sniffer, ask me how I know. You want one of these, you sign up for power work and make the big bucks body blocking bullets. Ha, say that five times

fast."

"Oh, wow," Mikey Blinked, "I didn't really realize what goes into these things... so what's up with the radios then?"

"*HA!* I know right? Might as well be walking around with a damn walkie talkie taped to my face! And we had to *beg* Socket for that. *Beg*. Don't ask him about it unless you've got an hour or two to spare. He'll go on about technomancers and government spooks, and why analog is safer than digital and other complete bunk. He'd be living out in the desert with a tin foil gizmo strapped to his head if it wasn't for this job. '***NO EVIDENCE!*** *LEAVE NO EVIDENCE YA BLARNEY GITS! YOU WANT A TECHNOMANCER UP YER ARSE?!'"*

They had a good laugh at Pebbles' poor imitation of Socket, and soon the van pulled into an abandoned recharge station, where Pebbles parked and hid the van inside the attached derelict car-wash.

"All kidding aside," said Pebbles, suddenly subdued, "These masks, they're... a promise. From Hellion to us. We step up and do the dirty work, the body blocking, that little above and beyond that no paycheck really covers for. But we aren't disposable," he tapped the mask at his forehead, "This proves that. If you want to wear the skull, you gotta dance with the demons."

Mikey didn't really know what to say to *that*. Dramatic much?

"That said," continued Pebbles, returning to a normal tone of voice, "It's not like we don't pass out regular helmets! Which I notice you aren't wearing! You just ***forget*** to bring your life-saving gear?"

"Uh, I, I thought we were just going to pick you up quickly."

"Tut tut tut. Rookie mistake. Flying debris and other hits to the head

are the number two way to die on the job. You can run to a hospital with a damn harpoon through your shoulder, but if you're all confused with a concussion you'll never find your way there. Always grab a helmet before you leave. Here," Pebbles hit the dashboard with a fist, and the glove compartment popped open, but with an attached secret section about the size of a medium trash can, "Most of these things have a place you can hide stuff. They're for hiding guns and drugs and other illegal shit really, but you can stick your helmet in there for safekeeping if you don't want to look like a helmet head while you're doing chore work. It's different between all the cars because it's a bunch of spastic tinkers working on them, so put in some time and learn 'em. Might save you an awkward trip to the station if the C's pull you over."

"Huh. Uh, that's pretty, um, neat..." mumbled Mikey. It was like spy movies, but for thugs instead. "So... what's the number **one** way of dying?"

"Flying debris and bullets and stuff through the torso. That's why we give out the flak vests."

"A-ah, that makes sense..."

"..."

"..."

"...You *are* wearing your flak vest under there right?"

"I... I might have forgot."

"By the walls, you're crazier than I am! I'm over here shitting my suit with a helmet on, and you're just over here free-stylin' it. Stop waving them brass balls around and let's head inside and grab some grub. Don't know about you, but henching makes me hungry."

"Ah-ha, heh, right. Food." As if his stomach would ever let him eat again with the ***massive*** knot in his gut. He was going to develop ulcers or something.

They exited the van. Pebbles went over to a section of the wall that separated the car-wash from the main building, where an ancient, rusty door stood fused shut. He tapped his helmet to some graffiti in the shape of an HH, and the door popped open without even a squeak. Pebbles pushed it open, revealing a darkened hallway.

With a glowing, floating skull in the middle of it.

"AH! What the hell!" both Pebbles and Mikey leaped back from the apparition, before realizing what they were actually looking at.

"T-Tofu?" asked Mikey.

"Hello Mikey. Hello Pebbles," Tofu replied.

"*Jesus* kid! Damn near gave me a heart attack! What the hell are you doing standing around here in the dark like a damn spectre!?" asked Pebbles.

"I'm trying to figure out how to update the Heroverse Wiki. Several facts are severely out of date," replied Tofu. It was his cell phone that was lighting up his mask, making it glow. "I managed to escape a few minutes after you left, then headed for the nearest safehouse after evading the authorities. Did you have trouble? I didn't expect to arrive before you."

"Not so much no. Had to drop off Buzzer with a quack real quick. Was a bit out of the way."

"Ah. Then Buzzer will be alright then?"

"He's fine. And you? Where's Zaps by the way?"

"Zaps is sleeping further in the building. He overstrained his power."

"Yeah, it really takes it out of him. Well hey, seems we all made it out a-okay then. We should celebrate! And turn on some damn lights... don't suppose there's still food in here?"

"Yes. I had some eggs."

They settled into the safehouse to wait for the lockdown to end and the heat to die down, not really celebrating, but telling jokes, eating snacks (someone had stocked the pantry with a few cans of salted peanuts), and listening to Tofu's *insane* retelling of events after they left, to de-stress after the harrowing events of the last few hours.

"Nah, no way. You beat Suprex? I don't believe it," said Pebbles.

"It was difficult, but once his kayfabe power is neutralized, much of his super strength goes with it. That's why I'm trying to update the wiki, they have several misconceptions on how his power works."

"Uh, Tofu, I don't really think you should be putting up his power details on the wiki," said Mikey.

"Yeah, that's the kind of information you keep close to the chest, and sell to the highest bidder," confirmed Pebbles.

"That's not what I meant!"

"Eh, it doesn't really matter either way," Pebbles dismissed, "Everyone in the business who matters already knows about Suprex's power. The real trick is actually outdoing Suprex at his own game, he's a master showman, juggles minions like us for breakfast."

"I think I can handle him."

Pebbles threw a peanut at Tofu, who caught and ate it. Soon after, their cellphones rang, with an announcement that the lockdown was ending.

"Oh shoot, already? Didn't expect that. Place your bets people," said

Pebbles, getting up from his seat to turn on a small television on the counter, an ancient looking flatscreen that must have been repaired dozens of times from the look of it.

"What are we betting on?" asked Tofu.

"How badly they mangle the narrative," answered Pebbles, "Five bucks says they pin the whole thing on us."

"What!? yelped Mikey. Images of his face plastered across the news as individual #1 flashed through his mind.

"I bet five dollars that they give insufficient information about the situation," declared Tofu.

"Oh pfft, come on, of course they are. Pick something we don't know."

"Ah... they will... show my fight with Suprex?"

"HA! They'd better! Need to see this shit."

They clustered around the television to see the news. As always, the general media during the lockdown had been suppressed in order to allow emergency services full control of the situation, and now with the lockdown lifted each news channel was scrambling to be the first to report their version of events. Mikey had been fifteen during the last Odd Summer, and he remembered thinking how redundant these news channels were, considering Central gave their official report to the public after every lockdown. Now that he'd lived through a lockdown from the other side of the law, he wondered; would Central's report be just as biased as the other news channels?

As these reports almost always went, a Central official dressed in a sharp suit approached a podium with the most somber expression they could muster.

"I will now give the report for the lockdown of Sector E12, which started at twelve o' seven p.m, and ended at five thirty-four p.m. The incident was first reported by the hero Dark Gauntlet, who encountered what he described as a 'vampire swarm' at eleven fifty-one a.m. A request for back-up was made and upon an assessment of the nature of the threat, a lock-down was immediately initiated."

"Hah. Take a drink gentlemen, there's the first fib," mocked Pebbles, "Buzzer and the sweeper team went missing a lot earlier than that. Probably took over an hour for the E12 officials to decide the revenue loss was worth it."

Mikey cringed internally, "Would they really delay the lockdown for that?"

"Of course. Them more than anyone, their main revenue source is in another sector. Getting E12 to lock down is probably like pulling teeth."

Oh, right. The Red Zone.

"Remember last summer with the lizard thing?" continued Pebbles.

Mikey shivered. He remembered the lizard thing. E13 hadn't locked down for it, and he remembered the video of Brick wrestling the two-story monstrosity to the ground and the hero team keeping it contained and away from civilians. It was one of the first big threats of that Odd Summer, but while the thing had looked terrifying (and given him nightmares), it ultimately wasn't a city threatening disaster.Nothing Kandor and his team couldn't handle.

The disaster that had killed Kandor came later.

"Kandor screamed into his com for like an hour to lock down when that thing crawled out and nothing," said Pebbles, "Here's what they didn't say on the news: the thing kept growing bigger! Doubled in

size every few minutes. It was the size of a mouse when it first started tearing stuff up. Hellion finally had to go out herself and blast it before it got too big to kill."

Mikey was stunned. He remembered the pictures of the burned-out monster husk on the news after the incident. That had been Hellion?... Well, it kinda made sense in retrospect. None of the E13 heroes had flame powers or used explosions.

"Wait, how do you know all that? Were you there?"

"Oh. Um. Well," Pebbles coughed, "You see, at this store where they were keeping this thing, they kept it in the backroom right? Illegal pet and all that. Well I was looking for the bathroom, and I see this thing in this tiny-ass cage, and it's food bowl is empty, and it's water is all dirty, so I think: poor thing needs something to drink. So I give it some of my whiskey, and I guess, it like, doesn't react to it well? Allergies maybe? But it was still drinking so, I, well... you know..." Pebbles trailed off at the blank stares Mikey and Tofu were giving him.

They went back to following the report.

"...During which the power grid suffered a critical failure, resulting in a blackout several blocks wide, hindering emergency services. Investigating heroes found several 'minions' at the scene, and were then ambushed by an unknown assailant. Heroes who arrived to reinforce found the suspects attempting to kidnap downed personnel-"

"WHAT!? THAT'S BULLSHIT!" cried Mikey. He couldn't believe this! They were twisting it all!

"Ehhhh," said Pebbles, waggling his hand in a seesaw motion, "Actually, I'll give them that one. Kinda caught us red-handed grabbing the heroes."

"But, we weren't kidnapping them! We just couldn't leave them with that monster on the loose! We weren't going to do anything bad to them!... Right?"

"Course not, but intent don't mean shit without a psychic on the scene. Hell, from the way things looked I'm surprised they didn't just start blasting. I would've. Lockdown isn't the time to pussyfoot around"

Mikey silently absorbed that explanation for a bit. Admittedly... yeah. He supposed it looked pretty bad from the heroes' perspective.

"...But still, they're also implying we caused that blackout. We had nothing to do with that."

"Uhhh..." Pebbles and Tofu exchanged a glance, "...well, down in the sewers we needed to shut off the power, and there was this gizmo, and well, you know how finicky those are..."

"..."

"...Tofu did it."

"Hey!"

"Would you guys keep it down? I'm trying to sleep," interrupted Zaps, entering the room, "OH! Is the news on? Did they show the part where I started blasting?"

"Uh, not yet Zaps," said Pebbles, grateful for the distraction, "They're still doing the report. "

"Ah. Well lemme know if anything cool happens."

"It might. Tofu says he beat Suprex."

"What!? Fuck off, no way!"

Zaps decided to stay up and watch, not wanting to miss any of the "good stuff," although he complained about the report not showing any pictures.

"...Whereupon the threat was finally contained and destroyed, thanks to a group effort consisting of Magenta, Brick, Hydrox, Essetec, and Polka-Dotis, despite interference by the notorious villain known as Warhead. Efforts then shifted towards tracking and wiping out the remaining vampire remnants..."

"None of those other heroes are documented as working in the surrounding sectors either," complained Tofu. He'd been scrolling through the different hero wikis on his phone, and seemed to be really irritated by the lack of proper documentation. Mikey wasn't surprised though. Those wikis were fan run, and while the popular, big name heroes like Kandor or the Guardian might have a fully fleshed out bio, there were a lot of minor heroes who were constantly popping up, getting reassigned, doing team-ups with nearby sectors, getting rebranded with new looks or names... and, of course, dying.

"... and in closing, let us please observe a moment of silence for the many men and women who lost their lives today, as well as the brave heroes who fell in defense of the city. Dark Gauntlet, Avos, Ignista; you will be missed. Thank you for your service."

The group fell silent around the television, and Mikey was only a little surprised when Pebbles and Zaps raised the beers they'd been drinking in a gruff, yet respectful salute (that Tofu then tried to

imitate). It was an odd juxtaposition seeing the minions, criminals by profession and lifestyle, honoring fallen heroes, but at the same time, the heroes had died in defense of everyone, so Mikey supposed it wasn't that strange. Maybe stuff like this wouldn't happen normally, but Odd Summer didn't play fair, and it was heroes who stepped in time and time again to even the odds.

The report came to a close, whereupon the general media channels sprung into motion like a swarm of starving pack rats on a dropped cracker. Pebbles and Zaps kept flipping from channel to channel, trying to find the ones with the best footage of the fights. Many of the channels were displaying found footage of heroes fighting vampires, but the ultimate performance of the night came from an unprecedented full release of Magenta's camera footage (with the audio only *slightly* garbled to protect sensitive information). It started when Magenta came around the corner of the building and spotted Tofu carrying Briarstone. Admittedly... yeah, Mikey had to admit that didn't look good at *all*. Tofu was in full combat mode, the combination of his suit, mask, and spindly yet muscular limbs making him look truly sinister. In the video, Magenta called for Tofu to stand down (which he did) and then the footage went wonky for a second, like seeing it through water, when Magenta got hit by an unseen super's (the hiding vampire's) ultrasonic blast. Suprex then tackled Tofu away from Briarstone, who Magenta proceeded to defend from multiple blasts that the vampire unleashed from a hidden vantage point... and electrical blasts from Zaps, aimed at her specifically.

"WOOO! YEAH! You see that?! I'm on the news!" yelled Zaps, waving his arms like he was at a sports game. Pebbles, Mikey, and then Tofu all threw peanuts at him.

The rest of it happened mostly as expected. Magenta spent most of the ensuing scuffle between body blocking for her less indestructible teammates, and trying to find the elusive figure that kept firing ultrasonic blasts from inside the buildings, until the moment when

she helped Brick capture Tofu. Mikey winced internally at the part where Magenta slammed into his friend after Brick chased him out of the building. Tofu had mentioned that in his retelling, but hadn't really played up the impressive flurry of blows he'd unleashed on the hero in an attempt to get away. Magenta's vantage point looked like she was trying to wrangle a demonic octopus.

Mikey favored his friend with a concerned glance, but Tofu was completely unphased, only half paying attention as he fiddled with his phone in an attempt to edit wikis. It was hard for Mikey to match the image of the sinister minion on the screen, with that of his friend there on the couch, nonchalantly messing with his phone.

Next, Warhead made his dramatic appearance on the screen, and Mikey felt his stomach do flip flops. Warhead was a boogeyman from Mikey's childhood, constantly raising the stakes for heroes when he showed up to a fight, and lurking in people's fears when he didn't. More than one hero had left the cape scene dead or crippled thanks to Warhead, and it was only the fact he spent most of his time away from Fortress City that many an E13 resident could sleep peacefully. Mikey himself had watched Warhead's final arrest on the news with Tim when they were ten years old, the two of them cheering as Kandor apprehended the menace. Seeing Warhead back near E13 had Mikey suddenly regretting everything, and Pebbles and Zaps seemed to be of the same opinion, although their fear stemmed from their assertion that Warhead was a hardass. Zaps was already lamenting the laps Warhead was going to make him run.

Finally, the camera revealed the super vampire for the first time, allowing the audience to see the vicious creature in full. Luckily it had attacked Hydrox first, who defended himself with barriers of water long enough to avoid being outright killed while the other heroes were distracted dealing with Warhead's assault. From there, it used Briarstone's strength and Avos' flight to relentlessly pursue individual heroes, attempting to absorb more powers and turn the

fight even more in its favor. Brick couldn't keep up with its speed and flight, Hydrox's waves weren't powerful enough to drown it before it broke free, and even a few attempts by Warhead were stymied by an automatic barrier that seemed unbreakable, if limited. It was the combined effort of Essetec and Polka-Dotis that managed to bring it to a standstill, and allowed Magenta to deal the finishing blow, her forcefield interacting strangely with the auto-barrier in a way that allowed her to bypass it. The vampire died with Magenta's fist going through one of it's giant compound eyes, both their barriers mangled against each other like amoebas made of glass shards, until finally the vampire expired explosively, each of its stolen powers firing off at once and shredding Magenta's arm to the bone before her forcefield could pop back into place. The last image from her camera was of the sky as she plummeted, the other two flying heroes racing to catch her. The footage ended with them managing to catch her safely before she could hit the ground.

"HOLY SHIT! DID YOU SEE THAT!?" yelled Zaps, suddenly breaking the hushed silence that had descended as the extraordinary fight reached its finale. Mikey realized he'd been holding his breath.

"Goddamn right I saw that!" said Pebbles, "That's our hero! That's E13 baby! E-THIRTEEN, E-THIRTEEN!"

Pebbles and Zaps began chanting like they were cheering a sports game, and when Tofu hesitantly joined in Mikey laughed and did so as well. Seeing the successful end to a lockdown was a relief they all felt after the danger of the past few hours.

"I don't know Tofu, you're gonna have to do a whole lot to top that one," said Pebbles, going back to flipping channels on the television again. Multiple stations were still playing the Magenta footage, and a couple were playing other fights between various heroes and swarms of vampires, but after almost a half-hour of channel surfing, not a single channel had covered the fight with Suprex.

"Well shoot. Sorry Tofu, I guess they aren't gonna release the

footage," said Pebbles, finally giving up.

"More likely they didn't record it. The power was out in the building, and Suprex's mask doesn't have a camera from what I could tell," replied Tofu.

"...So why did you bet they'd show it?"

Tofu shrugged, and then had peanuts thrown at him. Which he ate.

They eventually ran out of interesting clips to watch, but Pebbles claimed it was a bit too early to start driving around as a minion, and made a call to Rattleback to receive further instructions. After getting chewed out, he relayed that their choices were to either wait at the safehouse for the heat to die down, or risk sneaking their way back to E13 in their civilian identities. None of them had a pressing need to get back, so they decided to wait until night time. Hopefully by then the Red Zone night life would be out and about in full force once again, and they could become invisible in the traffic.

Tofu and Mikey decided to spend the time playing Gribblin Tamer on their phones, but when Mikey turned his on, he was bombarded with a deluge of delayed messages. He cringed, Tim had been trying to get a hold of him.

"I need to call Tim back real quick. He's been blowing up my phone."

"Alright."

He called Tim back. The phone didn't ring twice before Tim answered.

"HOLY SHIT, WHERE THE HELL WERE YOU DINGUS?!"

"Heh. Sorry man, I was at work when all the crazy started; I had my phone off and didn't even notice at first."

"Man, I thought you'd gotten yourself off'd by vampires or something. You *did* see the report right?"

"Yeah, I did. Vampire swarms and a super vamp."

"Dude, you don't even know! The forums are blowing up about it! Powers that copy powers are like, omega rare!"

Mikey grinned at the comment. This was one of the times where he *did* know.

"I know man. You've quoted all the stats to me. Is that what you're aiming for next? Gonna get an omega copy power?"

"Man, screw you," Tim laughed, "I'll become a tinker yet, just you watch."

"Ha, no worries man, I believe you."

"..."

"...Tim? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here... Hey, um, you saw the bit about Warhead right?" asked Tim, not half as exuberant as he'd been a second ago.

"Er, yeah I saw. Crazy right?"

"Right. Um... the thing is, it kinda freaked out my parents. They're saying they want to stay with my aunt for the whole summer, not just a week or two..."

"Oh. Well, that's... I mean it's not too bad?"

"What? Dude it sucks. We had so many plans. And I don't just mean the stupid tinker thing, we were gonna search for apartments and

stuff for college, remember?"

"Course I do man," although it *had* sort of taken a back seat in his brain, "I'm just saying now's not the time to be traveling around and stuff ya know? Batten down the hatches and all that. Besides, we can still do all that stuff, I just need to shuffle it around my job. I'm making mucho bank right now, so college is *totally* a go."

"Mucho bank? At a warehouse?"

Ack! "Er, you know what I mean, enough for the first semester at least," *and the next two years easy if I play this right,* "Plus, like you said, people are spooked and taking off, so they need hands more than ever."

"Huh. Maybe I should apply."

Fuckfuckfuck.

"Ha! You in a warehouse? Doing cave grunt work? Would your parents even let you?"*Pleasepleasesayno*.

"Hey, you never know, I could convince them to let me go to E13, *alone*, to work with you troglodytes... but nah, not my style," laughed Tim. Mikey laughed too, but it was a bit strained.

"Anyways Mikey, I did want to ask... well, with Warhead, and that lockdown, and just, y'know, *summer*, I talked with my folks, and... if you wanted to, you could spend Odd Summer up with us."

Mikey fell silent, stunned.

"Your mom too of course! We have the room... well, you'd have to room with me, and your mom could take my uncle's study. I can't promise it'll be comfortable, but since it's summer, sticking together is the important part right?"

Mikey broke into a smile. *He'd put up with my mom? Wow, he really is worried.*

"Hey, hey thanks Tim, really," said Mikey, "but I think I'm good man. I can't really quit the job yet anyways."

"Y-you sure?"

"Yeah. Look, I know Warhead is supposedly back or whatever, but that's not my problem right? I've got a steady job, my mom's boyfriend is out of the picture for good this time, and when Summer is over I'll have enough that I can room with you wherever. I'll keep my head down, and Summer will be over before we know it."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I'm sure. It'll be fine dude, promise."

"Hmm, I dunno man. Did you know that sixteen percent of all super brawls start in a warehouse?" asked Tim, in a tone that let Mikey know he was back to joking and quoting crap facts.

"Ha! No worries, between me, Tofu, and all our fellow cavemen we can take on any challengers. Moving boxes make Mikey the strong strong."

"Pfft, okay. Actually, is Tofu there with you now? He wasn't answering earlier either."

"Yeah, he's here. He's trying to figure out how to edit the wiki, says they are criminally out-of-date."

"Ha! Damn right they are, Odd Summer's messing everything up. Hey, I'm a content moderator on Heroverse, I'll send him an invite to edit."

"Cool, I'll let him know."

"... and what about Cin~dy?"

"What? She's fine? What do you mean? Why do you ask?"

"You ask her out yet?"

"What?! No! I've known her like two weeks dude, she barely knows me."

"Coward."

"What makes you think I was even gonna?"

"Dude, you told her you listen to Mega-B00t and she didn't run screaming."

"Cause Mega-B00t is the shit and you know it!"

The two of them didn't talk much longer, but that was fine, they would have plenty of time to talk later. Odd Summer would be over soon enough. All Mikey had to do was lay low, keep his head on his shoulders, and it would all work out fine. True, he wasn't quite as confident about the whole Warhead thing as he'd led Tim to believe, but Mikey was a minion now, he and Warhead were technically on the same side. Besides, most of the people he'd met working as a minion turned out to be pretty cool, shattering his preconceived notions of 'evildoers' left and right.

So how bad could the guy be?

"Jalopy-Deathtrap, you are clear to land."

"What was that tower? I'm sorry I couldn't make that out, my engine is *clanking* too damn loud."

"Land you banshee fart!"

Jonah Denver laughed, and guided his transport skimmer to the landing zone. To be fair, the old gal was indeed one of the oldest and loudest skimmers they had available, but Jonah wouldn't trade her

for the world. She might be loud, but that just meant whatever mechanical heart the wrench monkeys had given her was designed for power, not convenience, and that suited Jonah just fine. The old bird was a sturdy bitch, and had dusted off from more than one kerfuffle while wiping an ant off her windshield. He was headed back to base after one such encounter right now, a half-platoon of soldiers in the loading bay.

The ants had gotten the other half before he arrived, unfortunately.

But better half than nothing.

Jonah set the skimmer down right in the center of the pad, showing these other naysayers that the flying jalopy could *too* show as much grace as these newer models. He started to wind her engines down, eager to end his long shift pulling land-walkers out of the fire.

"Pilot, don't cut your engine just yet," came a new voice over the com.

"What's that tower?" asked Jonah, dreading the inevitable answer.

"Got a priority package for forward base Bravo-Seven. Needs to head out asap."

"Any reason why another bird can't take it? Just finished ninth hour, bird needs polish."

"All other skimmers are busy *pilot*. Keep spinning engines and await package."

"Roger that," *load of bullshit*. There were three other birds on the tarmac waiting to go that he could see. But those were the newer models.

"Hey Jonah, if you're tired I can take this package," said Davey Jesson, his co-pilot, "I'm only four hours since you picked me up."

"Pfft, I'm still fresh as a daisy. And let *you* fly my baby girl? Hell hasn't frozen over yet D.J."

"Man, you know she's been around the block a hundred times already."

"Talk like that about my girl again, I dare you. I'll drop you out the back, you picnic basket."

Davey just smiled that shit-eating grin of his, acknowledging their back-and-forth. Jonah went back to his pre-flight checks. He put as much care into them as he always did, but then did them again to settle his nerves. Priority package? Forward base? Not risking a newer model? He knew what that meant.

The package was a Victor.

Thirty minutes later (*priority*, *riiight*), his suspicions were confirmed when *eight* soldiers in full battle garb escorted three men to the tarmac. Two of these three were guards for the third, their seven foot frames bulging with muscles an obvious indicator that they were silverbacks. Either low-calibre strength supes, or people hopped up on the government's newest experimental formula, the means was irrelevant. What mattered was the heavy duty bolters each held trained on the third person, a Victor in a tinker made restraint jacket. They weren't taking any chances with this one.

A criminal. A cowl. A **Villain**.

A *kid*.

They marched him over to the skimmer and loaded him into the

passenger hold. Then the *entire* escort took their seats along with him. Seems they were along for the ride.

"You see that?" said Davey, making sure to use the pilot only channel.

"I'm not blind."

"That was a *kid!*"

"I *know*." *Hell, he's probably barely older than mine. Eighteen? Nineteen? If he's twenty I'll eat my boots with ketchup.*

"Think they got enough babysitters on him? Jesus. Probably can't even grow peach fuzz."

"Don't let looks fool you Davey," replied Jonah, not *quite* believing the words himself, "If he's here he's still a Victor."

As the mechanic/tinker finished checking the bird, and they were cleared for takeoff, Jonah's thoughts uncharacteristically turned to his wife and boy back in Fortress City. Normally he liked to keep his head clear of distracting thoughts while in the air (keep work and home separate as it were), but the kid Victor in the back had him thinking of home. Odd Summer had ended a month ago, and as usual he'd spent it with his family, weathering the storm of bad news bulletins and disasters that plagued everyone during that time of year. He could have stayed with them this time...

But he was an army man, and the real work for the army came after Odd Summer ended, when all the beasties and monsters came crawling out of the woodwork with new powers and mutations and tried to start putting down roots. This would be his third tour of duty, each of which consisted of either two years, or just six months if you toured the Panama canal after Odd Summer. His first tour had been before he met his wife, the second while his son was still a baby. This would be his first down in Panama. When he'd accepted this posting, he'd been thinking of the short six months before he'd get to go back home. His boy wasn't going to be a boy much longer, and he wanted

to take the time to be there with him while he was still young enough to care about having his old man around. He smiled at the memory of the grouchy teen, grumbling goodbye and kicking him in the shin with a "you'd better come back."

He would. He'd make sure of it. But for now that army money was too good to pass up, and his grouchy teen had his sights on a good school. *Damn kid is better at math than his old man ever was, that's for sure.*

The first half of the flight was uneventful, the kid in the back (*the Victor, Jonah reminded himself. The Victor*) not causing any trouble. Unfortunately it seemed they wouldn't make it all the way to Bravo-Seven without complications. A curl of smoke was winding its way up into the sky. He diverted course just enough to check it out. You didn't ignore the unusual out here.

What the hell is that? We're way too far north for...

He was wrong. They flew over the next elevated hill and suddenly had a great view of the expansive lowland valley.

Ants. Lots and lots of ants. They blanketed the valley from one end to the other, like a living, chitinous carpet, the smallest the size of a person, the biggest ones the size of tanks and small houses, but that wasn't what caused Jonah's heart to fall into his stomach.

They had a *queen* with them. The first he'd ever seen in person. This wasn't just a raiding party, this was a colony expansion, and they were *well* past the frontline! The reason why was immediately apparent as well, all of the ants were *translucent*. Each looked as if it were sculpted by an expert glassworker, only a slight shimmer inside each where the also translucent organs shuddered and jiggled, or where some food had yet to be digested. In the daylight it was easy enough to make them out, but at night they would be practically

invisible to casual flyovers, which was how they must have snuck past the forward bases. The only reason Jonah had spotted this group, *the only reason*, was because of an all-terrain supply truck that had had the misfortune of being in their path. Why the truck was all the way out here he couldn't begin to guess, but the unfortunate soldiers had been encircled completely, and either the truck had been damaged enough to burn, or the doomed soldiers had set it affire themselves in some last-ditch effort.

His copilot Davey immediately started yelling into his headset, "SKIMMER THIRTY-FIVE TO ALL POINTS! WE ARE NINE NORTH BY EIGHTY-TWO WEST! I HAVE EYES ON AN ANT QUEEN! REPEAT, I HAVE EYES ON AN ANT QUEEN!"

Jonah felt sick that there wasn't a damn thing they could do for the few soldiers somehow still alive near the truck, but even worse than that was the thought of a queen getting this far north, and a mutant at that. They didn't have any kind of ordnance on the transport skimmer that could kill a queen, nor could they stick around and follow the queen's progress indefinitely. Already he could see a fresh batch of eggs being pushed out by the bloated insect, and it was likely a few of those would be fliers, growing and ready to fly within the half-hour. Now that her cover was blown, it was likely the queen would stop restraining herself and go into full production right there. If she managed to dig in and hide, it might be weeks before she could be dislodged, and the entire time she would be able to send those damn stealth ants in pincer movements against the forward bases, or maybe birth her own Daughter and try to sneak another colony even farther north!

He circled while Davey communicated with whoever he could get a hold of, trying to gather as much footage as possible with the skimmer's cameras. It wasn't much, but maybe the intel would be useful to the eggheads later on. If only there was a clear spot where he could get close to the burning truck-

BANG

BANG* *BANG* *BANG

*What the **fuck**?!*

Those had come from his bird! From *inside* the transport! Were they shooting their bolters out the fucking loading bay door?! It wouldn't do crap at this height.

He yelled into his headset, "The fuck is going on back there?!"

"...nothing. Just an argument on proper procedure and politeness."

Jonah's blood ran cold. *The Victor!*

"Am I talking to the pilot of this hunk of junk?" asked the young super.

"Y-yes. Um. W-we're in the air above a live combat zo-"

"No duh shithead. There's windows in this deathtrap, I see them. Here's what's going to happen. I'm gonna murder the shit out of those ants down there. You're gonna park this thing right fucking here and wait til I'm done. If I have to walk my ass back, finding and killing you will be the first thing on my to-do list, understand?"

"U-understood."

"Make sure you get a good look at what I'm about to do, and tell your bosses what you see. I want them to know they don't tell me what to do. No one does."

"E-er, right."

"Swing on your right."

What?

__Whuff__

"Fuck!"

Jonah pulled on the stick *hard* as the transport suddenly swung up to the right, easily past ninety degrees, and the old girl whined as her gyroscope and engines laboriously compensated. What the hell had *that* been?

He got his answer a second later, as an impact on the ground threw up a cloud of dirt. The dirt rained down and a humanoid figure stepped out of the cloud. The kid had *jumped* out the side, and the force of it set the skimmer to rocking.

Ants attacked immediately, workers and soldiers rushing the threat, already going mad from a threat being within the vicinity of their queen. The first ant died as its head exploded, the kid's figure barely visible in the blur that burst the car-sized ant's head as if it were a ripe melon. That blur continued on, in sudden starts and stops, as it rapidly smashed a path to the queen like an angry pinball. Ant soldiers stepped up to bodyblock, but regardless of how many bodies they put in the way, each was smashed to pieces like the fragile glass they resembled; the kid was a bull in a china shop.

Finally, the kid reached the queen, and paused for a second to begin his last dash. Immediately, several insectoid figures leapt at him, the

translucent shapes indecipherable to Jonah. For a second he feared they had powers of their own, but he knew that wasn't the case. They were only specialized mutants, made specifically to guard the young queen. If ants could trigger, it was only the queens who held that ability. Any other variants were just custom mutants birthed by the queens. Either way, they were smashed aside just as all the others had been.

And then the queen was dead.

The ants went *mad.*

The entire valley, from north to south, charged the young super all at once. He was nearly buried under translucent ant flesh as they crawled over each other to get at him in their fury. Jonah tracked the blur the kid made as he tried to stay afloat, and with so many ants attacking all at once, Jonah finally noticed the flaw in the kid's power. After every one of those mad dashes, the kid needed to come to a complete stop. Sometimes only for a moment, but other times the kid stopped for one, three, and even five whole seconds at a time. Not long, but long enough for an ant to take his head off. The only thing that saved him was the ants' own confusion and rage, unable to immediately track him after each jump and needing to reorient on the threat each time.

Jonah throttled the skimmer's engines, and made a beeline for the kid. It was made harder by the fact that the Victor kept jumping, but eventually he managed to get the skimmer ahead of the kid's path, and turned the skimmer sideways to line up the door. Hopefully the kid could control himself enough to not punch a hole in the bird?

__Wham__

Apparently so. The skimmer rocked as the kid landed in the hold, and

Jonah throttled the engines to gain altitude. The ants were already making a living mountain beneath him and he wasn't going to chance dealing with *that* pile of manure. The old bird pulled away fast, and both Jonah and Davey breathed through clenched teeth due to what had just transpired.

Then the kid must have put one of the headsets back on, because the channel crackled to life.

"HOLY SHIT! IS IT ALWAYS THIS MUCH FUN?!"

Jonah couldn't find the words.

"GODDAMN! WHY DID NOBODY EVER SAY SO?! THAT WAS THE *SHIT!* IS IT ALWAYS LIKE THIS? I WOULD HAVE SIGNED UP AT SIXTEEN! HOLY CRAP!"

"U-uh..."

"Fuck that was awesome!... Anyways... hey shit for brains, you're going the wrong way."

"W-what?"

"You're heading south. Turn us north."

"North?"

"Fortress City dumbass. I've got shit to do. Get me as far as you can and I'll call us even."

Jonah considered smashing the skimmer into the ground right then and there, and if he believed for a *second* that would kill the Victor and keep him away from Fortress City, away from his *family*, he

would have. Even if he'd just saved him from death by ants. Even if it meant taking them all with him. But he knew it wouldn't, so he turned the skimmer and kept flying. North.

He'd never forget the sound he heard next. At first he didn't recognize it. It was laughter, coming from the super powered teen in the back of his skimmer. Not the mad laughter of a Victor monologuing, or the cruel laugh of a mean child. Jonah turned in his seat, and stared back through the cabin into the passenger hold, where the Victor, barely eighteen, was looking out the open loading bay at the sunset, covered in translucent ant blood, the corpses of the murdered escort team still warm and bleeding on the deck.

Laughing the innocent laugh of a kid having fun.

__ker-chak__

Jonah's eyes opened at the sound of a door opening. A man in a suit poked his head in, "Mr. Jonah? Sorry for the wait; we'll see you now."

A grunted "mhm," was all Jonah said in response. He wiped the sand from his eyes and blinked as the dream faded. It'd been a long time since last he dreamed of Warhead's first escape, likely dredged up by the sounds of some hero brawl that was currently playing on a tiny vidscreen in the corner of the waiting room. It was tuned to one of the news channels he never bothered paying attention to.

Stupid dream. It'd gotten most of the details wrong, as they were wont to do. First and most of all was that Davey, his co-pilot, had been dead for years before Jonah ever met Warhead, killed during

Jonah's second tour of duty when a mutant grasshopper attacked their skimmer. J.D. and D.J. Their passengers had quickly taken to naming their old skimmer the Jalopy-Deathtrap as a joke. The jalopy hadn't survived that grasshopper either come to think of it. Damn bugs.

And a simple silverback team to escort Warhead? Jonah snorted mirthlessly. Laughable. Two supers with anti-kinetic powers had brought the eighteen year old supervillain down south on that first trip. They *had* come across the mutant ant queen made of glass though. That part was real. Warhead had helped kill the queen that snuck north, but his two escorts had died in the process of fighting the rogue ant army. Whether or not Warhead had something to do with it had never been quite clear. Either way, Warhead had commandeered the transport after the fighting was over, and made his first escape from Panama that day.

Jonah had done two more tours of Panama after that one. Nothing the ants threw at him quite scared Jonah the way Warhead did, laughing as he forced Jonah to fly him as far to Fortress City as they could get. Jonah could do nothing to stop Warhead, but he could help keep the damn bugs away from his city at least. You didn't realize it in Fortress City's sterile confines, but outside the walls life *thrived*. A one-in-several-billion chance of a bug getting powers meant nothing when there were trillions of them. Keep the monstrous ants away from the city his family lived in, and earn a pretty penny to put his kid through college at the same time to boot. It had seemed like a no-brainer.

His son was dead now though. Another lie the dream told. *If only I-*

"Mr. Jonah?" asked the man in the suit.

"I'm coming. Keep your shirt on." He stood up, his old joints popping from his nap in the waiting room chair. The two agents who sat on either side of him followed suit. Technically they were his escorts, but he knew they were basically his handlers. Oh how the tables had turned. Now he was the Victor, but they needn't have bothered with escorts for him. Even if he cared to run, which he didn't, he was far too old for that running crap.

He followed the man, who introduced himself as Jerry, into a room with a steel conference table. There were two more suits with him, and they immediately got to work pushing forms and charts and other crap under his nose. As if he would read it.

"A pleasure to meet you Mr. Jonah. I've read your file. Five tours of duty, *three* guarding the Panama passage. Quite impressive."

Jonah nodded in confirmation of the number only, and then zoned out of the discussion, wishing to get it over with.

"...Technically your status will be that of a sidekick, but unofficially you'll be counted as a senior member of the team. That applies to pay and benefits such as..."

Benefits. Ha. Could have used those ages ago.

"...Your mask will need to be equipped with a camera during the probationary period. That can be removed afterwards if you wish, although we do encourage keeping it for liability reasons. Some

heroes also like to use the footage for social media or advertising, which has a separate form over here..."

Buncha bullcrap. Endorsements? Exposure? What, are they trying to sign me up for a band? Is this what these heroes *spend their time on? Useless shit like this?*

"...I don't suppose you've given any thought to what you might want as your hero name? You'll have to check it against the database, but as long as its been out of use for-"

"I'm sorry, but can we wrap up this song and dance?!" interrupted Jonah, exasperated, "I don't know what they've told you, but I don't give a *shit* about this crap. Sorry to waste your time, but I won't be joining any of these, these ***hero*** teams," he sneered. *They couldn't help my boy.* "Just, just throw me in a damn cell already and we can all get on with our lives."

Dead silence.

"...Cell?" asked Jerry, uncertainly.

Jonah almost laughed, "Oh, did they not tell you? Destruction of infrastructure. Felony offense. But these bleeding hearts take one look at the fragile old vet and can't do what needs doing," ***I*** *should've been there for him,* "Keep trying to give me these *deals*. Damn waste of everybody's time."

Jerry looked poleaxed. "That's... I'm sorry, I was given to understand that you wanted to be here."

"Well they fed you bullshit then. I don't."

Jerry's lips pressed thin, the face of a person who suddenly realized *exactly* just how much shit someone's fed them. "That's unfortunate. Sorry to waste *your* time then, Mr. Jonah." Then, strangely, he started packing up. Jonah might have expected him to plead, or blow up on the two suddenly sweating aides who looked like they might be the spewers of the aforementioned bullshit. In his experience suits never mummed up and just *left*.

The hell was his game?

"That it?"

"I should fucking hope so," replied Jerry, while angrily stuffing papers into his briefcase, "My sector's hero team was already understaffed for ages, and now I find myself with my most versatile member in the hospital, with no prospects of a replacement, all while *Warhead* is free to run roughshod through my sector. So forgive me if I'm too busy to deal with *shit* right now," he finished, throwing a glare at the two aides to make sure they knew they were the majority of that statement.

"...Warhead?"

"Oh, hadn't heard?" Jerry grabbed the smartphone of one of the aides, who didn't protest, and punched in some buttons before tossing the phone in front of Jonah. "Seems Warhead is once again, for the ***upteenth time***, back in Fortress City. E13, my sector, is unfortunately his favorite stomping grounds, so you can imagine I'm in somewhat of a *rush*," he explained, angrily. Then he went back to ferociously

packing up his papers and forms as the video played. It started at Warhead's violent introduction to a large, rock-like man.

Jonah's heart sank as he watched. That was Warhead alright, arrogant smile and all. It really didn't matter, did it? Warhead would break whatever and whoever he wanted, and when they finally caught him, he'd break out and do it all over again. And he'd get away with it. All because he also broke ants along the way. Because he had a power that was *useful* to them, that allowed him to destroy what they needed destroyed. So they let him live. Let him walk away again and again. If it had been Warhead who destroyed his son's company, who destroyed his son's livelihood and dreams, would they have let him walk away? Probably. *He doesn't deserve to laugh like that. Not when my son can't. My son was trying to* build *something.*

And then the bug appeared on the video, and he nearly had a heart attack.

"Is that a ***fucking ant!***?" Jonah snatched the phone off the table to take a closer look.

"Hm?" Jerry looked up, "Oh, the vampire. Just one of those endemic problems of the outer sectors."

Jonah took a closer look, and his heart rate slowly returned to normal. Indeed it wasn't an ant, even if it looked slightly similar. His old eyes had fooled him. But still, bugs in the damn city. *Was I just wasting my time fighting? Time I could have spent with him?* At least Warhead was already smashing it like the bug that it was...

...Huh?

...Why the hell wasn't he killing it?

...Where was he going?

In the video, Warhead took a few potshots at the vampire, failed, and then left.

But... that's all he's good for.

The video continued, and it was left to the heroes to stop the vampire. All of them young faces he didn't recognize. *Not one of them looks older than thirty. Late thirties tops. My boy... my* son *was already forty.* The damn bug had them on the ropes multiple times, its strange multi-power allowing it to counter and strike back at any individual super. They countered with teamwork, using tactics and training to drive the bug into a corner with a determination that would have made any drill sergeant cry tears of joy.

Their teamwork and strategy paid off, and eventually they slowed it down enough for someone to take a real stab at it. The cape wearing the camera was the one to deal the finishing blow.

Nearly killing herself in the process.

__crack__

The phone shattered in his grip, crushed into shards that stabbed into his palm, the power going out with a sad fizz. The owner gasped, but took one look at Jonah's scarred face twisted in fury and decided they could get a new phone.

"She live?" asked Jonah, not looking up, "The young woman?" The young *hero*. Who's arm was pulped and shattered while risking her life, because a monster like Warhead wouldn't do *the one thing he was good for!*

Jerry stopped his packing and leveled a cool glance across the table at Jonah, "You mean Magenta? Yes, barely. She suffered organ failure from the ultrasonic blast that resulted, but they somehow managed to stabilize her in time. She'll be in the hospital until a super who can heal her past her forcefield has a spare moment. As you can imagine, there's a long waiting list due to Odd Summer."

Jonah stared down at the phone. He'd spent his life trying to hold back the horrors of Odd Summer. To keep them away from his family, from the people he cared about. Spent his time like it was water, to make things better for the next generation.

He'd failed. His son, the builder, the dreamer, had died alone, his spirits crushed. Warhead, the monster, the destroyer, had lived. Lived and was allowed to be *happy*.

And now the next generation of young people were again selling their lives for a better future.

Jonah dropped the remnants of the phone, and held his bleeding hand out to Jerry.

"Pen."

Hellion

Some days were quiet. They crawled along, and you had time to get all your paperwork done, make a nice lunch, maybe watch a movie, and then hey, still had the whole afternoon to plot your next crime.

Other days though...

__BWAAAAAA__ *__BWAAAAAA__*

Other days you spent trying to keep your idiot employees from offing themselves, and then the base alarm goes off anyways.

Hellion excused herself to her guest, then left her office via her personal elevator, taking it up and exiting to the main hub.

She sighed as she took in the scene, which was more or less as she expected. Minions were running to-and-fro, trying to get to wherever they needed to be. Rather chaotic, as you had veterans and newbies, dominoes and boneheads, idiots, and a few cowards. All of them stepped out of her path regardless of who they were, although some of the newbies and idiots trailed in her wake like flotsam, seeking stability from their boss. All the veterans gave her space. If it came to a fight, you didn't want to be near her regardless of who you were.

She headed for Rattleback, who was already in the main chamber attempting to put order to the mayhem.

"What's going on Rattleback?"

"One of the garage entrances was breached."

"Warhead?"

"Warhead. I'm running it as a drill to get some use out of it."

Hellion sighed in relief at having someone as competent as Rattleback running things. Some days it felt like the entire company was only a few straws short of collapsing, and without people as competent as her lieutenants it most definitely would have by now. For some reason, recruiting people from the underbelly of society tended to make it difficult to find competent employees. Who would have guessed?

They watched the newbies and idiots scramble in circles for a while, until passing boneheads thankfully grabbed them and shoved them in the right directions without Rattleback having to prompt them. Most of the powered minions in HH were rather competent, if only because the incompetant ones didn't last long. Wearing a mask meant you were strong enough to take the hits, or were smart enough to know when to get out of the way. Or you were lucky. Stupidly, ridiculously lucky. Which was apparently a thing, according to certain supers with luck based powers, but they tended to be a bit loopy.

A minion in a domino mask approached, one of Rattleback's trainees, but seemed uncertain as to who to address with Hellion there. Rattleback solved it by addressing him first.

"How's the evacuation proceeding?"

"Um, most dominoes are about ninety-percent clear, but there are a few stragglers. Almost all the engineers are clear, but there was a problem with the, um, scorpion girl?"

"Her name's Nicole. Avoid appellations if they didn't pick them themselves."

"Y-yes sir. Well, she doesn't fit in any of the current emergency elevators, and the breach happened on the garage route we had designated for her."

Rattleback frowned at the trainee, "Then have her use a different garage route?"

"Er, we were going to, but it seems she panicked and fled into the sewers."

Rattleback sighed, "Have someone ping her mask before she gets too far and let her know it was just a drill. She can't be out of range already."

"Yes sir, and um, some of the on-duty boneheads seem to be, uh, missing? Mostly new hires."

Both Rattleback and Hellion rolled their eyes at that.

"Make a note of the ones who went missing and memorize their call signs. Don't assign them to important engagements in the future or rely on them as backup for the dominoes. If it becomes a real problem, downgrade their status to domino. Oh, and don't tell them directly, get a lieutenant to do it for you. Sometimes people react badly."

The trainee gulped, "Yes sir."

Rattleback went over a few more details with the trainee, then sent him off to deal with the finishing touches of the evacuation drill.

"What was that about the girl not fitting on the elevator?" asked Hellion. All the elevators were rated for thousands of pounds, and

spacious enough to fit even the largest mutants. It had been quite the investment to set up.

"Ah, the new girl Tofu brought in during the zombie rat incident, Nicole. Her mutation makes standard conveyances difficult."

Hellion frowned in confusion, "The girl with the snake tail?"

Rattleback was already shaking his head, "Her mutation is far more extensive than that. By her own words, she'll likely exceed twenty tons by the time she's finished regenerating. It's a hyper-dense mutation, so she won't be as large as she could be, but it still far exceeds the weight capacity of the personnel elevators, and to transfer her overland a semi-truck will be neccessary."

Hellion's eyebrows had risen as she listened to Rattleback. Obviously she'd missed that information in the hecticness of the zombie rat incident (maybe Sandra had mentioned it?), but in fairness to her she'd been distracted. She'd seen all sorts of mutations in her line of work, and she'd done lots of frantic research on the subject as a worried first-time parent to a child with a mutation, but a twenty-ton mutation? The only time you saw those was... ugh. She hated bringing stuff like this up, but being the boss meant asking the hard questions.

"Is she stable?" asked Hellion.

"Oh, absolutely," answered Rattleback, to Hellion's relief, "Actually she's probably more stable than the majority of people we get through here. Smart too. Socket has her on the advanced engineer's course."

"Well that's some pleasant news for once," said Hellion, feeling both surprised and relieved. Mutavus affected everybody differently, but a general rule of thumb she'd seen again and again was that the more it affected you physically, the higher the chance of it affecting you mentally. Class four mutations, or catastrophic mutations as most

called them, almost always ended with the victim becoming a mindless monster in some form or another. Even the ones that kept their minds wound up being... not right. Hellion had needed to put down more than one poor SOB who'd mutated badly, just part of the cowl territory, and she'd hated every moment of it.

Rattleback nodded in agreement. "Looks like the evacuation is just about complete. Should we go greet our guest?"

"Yes, I suppose we *should* stop him from putting more holes in my base," replied Hellion.

She led the way to the garage, and then followed the boneheads towards the expected point of contact. The boneheads were following proper protocol, with brutes and people who could take a hit in front, and people with glass-cannon abilities and powers in the back. Her heart lurched to see a pair of red metal gauntlets in the mix, and she had to stop herself from yelling at her daughter to get to an elevator. She huffed, silently. That was going to take some getting used to. Thank goodness this time was just a drill.

Hellion moved to the front of the crowd, glad to see that someone had opened the blast doors. They wouldn't have stopped Warhead even if they needed to, and she was serious about him damaging the base. Warhead wasn't an idiot, but he also didn't care much for inconveniences. He was just as likely to punch through a locked door as wait for someone to open it, a personality trait that often had him butting heads with Socket, who had to fix all the things Warhead broke.

They didn't need to wait long. Soon a humanoid figure stomped his way down the exit tunnel, and it was a tense second for the boneheads before he emerged from the gloom with a shout.

"Who the hell took my code off the door?!" yelled Warhead, once he

was in sight.

Hellion and Rattleback both sighed. Some things never changed.

"It's been eight years Warhead. The codes have changed," replied Rattleback, with the long-suffering tone of someone who'd had to explain something over and over again.

"Well I don't know why you keep changing mine. You know I won't remember a new one. Hey there Hellion, it's good to see you girl. Still wearing that darklord outfit I see," Warhead smiled.

"Stop punching holes in my base you lummox," Hellion replied, with a scowl that slowly broke out into her own smile. She leaned in to give him a hug, which he reciprocated.

"Ah, it's been too long. Still like hugging a tin can though," said Warhead.

Hellion thumped his shoulder. "You could always visit more you ass. Not like it takes you long to travel."

"Bah, you don't need me pushing all your carefully stacked dominoes over. Until you do. What's so important you had to sneak me a message...?" he trailed off as she subtly signaled him to silence. "So, how are things?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Hectic, like always. Here, let's head to my office."

They began to head back, and Rattleback went to herd the confused minions back to work.

"Hectic huh? Need me to get some of these slackers into shape?" he glared at the group of boneheads that were filtering back. Some of the ones who recognized him tried to make themselves inconspicuous.

"Now now, try to go a day before you traumatize my employees. I

don't need you scaring off the new recruits."

"Why? Any of them worth a damn?"

"Oh, quite a few this time. One you might even recognize."

"Mhm? And who's that?"

"Someone you know. Someone who might not have been old enough the last time you came round."

"Stop playing coy woman, you know I don't do guessing games... wait."

Hellion grinned like the cowl who just caught the cape, and Warhead followed her eyes over to the group of boneheads. It didn't take him long to single out one bonehead wearing heavy-duty tinker-made gauntlets, and they were red, how much more obvious could it be?

"Do my eyes deceive?! Is that the little firestarter herself? All growed up and wearing her own mask?" His voice boomed across the room, and the minion in question froze like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Slowly she turned to Warhead, trying to ignore the curious gazes of the other minions who'd turned at the ruckus.

"Uh. Hello Warhead."

"Warhead? Warhead?" He clutched his hands over his heart, *dramatically*, then said in a teary voice, "Hellion! She don't remember me no more!"

Ifrit slouched and sighed, "Hello Uncle Bert. It's good to see you."

"Get over here you munchkin! Where's my hello? Or should I say beanstalk? When'd you get so damn tall?"

Hellion had to restrain herself from cackling at her daughter's plight as Warhead gave her the third degree. She had promised her daughter to keep work and homelife separate, but Warhead had made no such promise whatsoever, and good luck trying to wring one out of him.

Serves you right for making your mother worry so often.

Eventually Ifrit managed to extricate herself from the situation after promising to catch up properly when her shift was over, and retreated with the other boneheads while threatening several of them with fire if they continued snickering. Warhead rejoined Hellion and Smoke as they headed for her office.

"Damn, was I really gone that long? They grow so damn fast," said Warhead.

"You're telling me? I keep forgetting she's eighteen and I don't need to put her on timeout for sneaking into the base. She's given me two heart attacks already and we're barely a month into Odd Summer."

"Only two? Ah, she always was a good kid. She'll make a great minion Hellion, you worry too much."

The two of them chattered on the way back to Hellion's office, and Warhead found another old acquaintance waiting for him there.

"Murphy! How's it been girl?"

"Agh. Not so loud please Warhead," requested the woman resting in a

comfy office chair. She wore plainclothes (a comfortable tracksuit), but her white opera mask (decorated with *math equations* of all things) was currently pushed up to allow for a cold compress to be applied to her eyes and forehead.

"Oof, sorry Murphy," continued Warhead, in a quieter voice, "Do a lot of spending then?"

"Yes. That lockdown could have gone very badly."

"Ah, I guess I have you to thank for the near misses? Damn mosquito thing nearly caught me three times. Kept pulling powers out of its ass."

"You're lucky it didn't bite you," chuckled Murphy, giving Warhead a one-handed arm clasp in lieu of a hug. "It's good to see you Bert. How have you been?"

"Oh, same ol' same old. Ants are holed up to endure Odd Summer, then they'll come marching two by two come winter and I'll be up to my knees in bug guts again. How's the casino business?"

"Oh, you know. Ups and downs. Hellion keeps spending all my hard-earned money though. Her kids keep getting into the most *interesting* trouble."

"My *valuable employees* Murphy," corrected Hellion. Warhead and Murphy both chuckled.

"Well then," said Warhead, " Down to business. What's so important you're playing spy with me Hellion?"

"I have to admit, I'm curious myself. She's been so very mum the past few weeks. Makes me think she's up to ~something~," said Murphy, removing the compress and pulling her mask down. Some talks simply required proper atmosphere... even if you were in plainclothes.

"I'm planning a heist," said Hellion, simply.

"...That it?" asked Warhead.

"Boo~ poor build-up, anti-climatic finish," criticized Murphy.

"Oh come now, you haven't even asked what I'm stealing yet. I'll give you a hint, we can only steal it during Odd Summer."

Both of her compatriots paused, thinking. Murphy got it first, though from her wince she might have used her power to peek.

"You mean *The* Heist!" said Murphy, suddenly animated. Then she had to quickly pull her mask up again to put the compress back on, leaning back with an "ugh."

"You're pulling my leg," said Warhead.

"Nope. Someone in Central slipped up, and Jasper managed to get their transfer plan for this year," replied Hellion.

"Wait, *Jasper*?"

"And confirmed by Trebla, I'm not an idiot."

"Ah, Trebla huh... well hot damn, when we doing this?"

"Can't tell you yet. I don't want any telepaths or precogs or calculators or *whatever* picking up on what you may or may not know before we're ready. For now the only ones with full knowledge are myself and Trebla... oh, and maybe Smoke?"

The three of them looked over to the fourth figure, standing at attention just over Hellion's shoulder. He neither confirmed nor denied (didn't even move beyond breathing really), so she just shrugged and turned back to her guests.

"Well, if you can't tell us, what do you want us doing in the meantime?"

"I *was* going to ask you to stay low-profile, but since *that* is already up in smoke-"

"You knew it would be, don't lie," grinned Warhead.

"-We're going with plan *A*. I've been calling in all of the old crew, and I'll leave you to your own devices as long as you *prepare*. I also have the details of a decoy plan we'll be implementing to throw precogs and such off the scent."

"Wait," said Murphy, slowly, "When you say all of the old crew..."

Hellion's smile faltered for the first time as she bit her lip. "Yes, Cookie too."

Both Warhead and Murphy paled.

"Hellion!" cried Murphy.

"What!? Why would you call *him*!?" asked Warhead.

"Hold on, hold *on*," said Hellion, raising her hands to halt the protests, "Trust me, I thought about not doing it, but you both know that if we did this job and didn't invite Cookie, he'd *never* forgive us for it."

"That... yeah, that's true," admitted Warhead, "But still, he gives me the creeps."

"Is that even safe with your employees though?" Murphy put forth.

"You know how he gets with some people, and my power can't keep them safe from him."

"I'm not expecting you to spend for that. Look, I'll be making efforts to keep him from getting out of hand. If worst comes to worst... I can always point him in someone else's direction, there's plenty of opportunity with Odd Summer."

Warhead and Murphy both grimaced at the thought of it, and Hellion didn't exactly like it herself, but it was true. Odd Summer revealed exactly the types of people that Cookie would take an interest in. Hopefully that would be enough.

Hellion sighed, "I'll understand if this is a dealbreaker for you two."

Warhead and Murphy considered it silently.

"...Ah screw it. You ain't scaring me away doll. I'm not missing this one for the world," said Warhead.

Hellion smiled and turned to Murphy, who was biting her lower lip as she patted her forehead with the compress.

"...This is going to cost so much money," pouted Murphy, giving in, "Just, keep him away from my casino."

"I'll do my best Murphy."

"Good. This job is already going to cost enough as it is."

"I know Murphy... But think of the *payoff*."

They did, and grinned. Like cowls who caught the cape.

Ch49 Aftertaste

I like Gribblin Tamer. Simple rules, complex gameplay, a plot that is unpredictable but not so convoluted that I can't understand the human reasoning involved. But most of all, I like that there is no risk of death (a wonderful component of all video games really). You can be fighting vicious monsters, who are far stronger than yourself, with amazing esoteric powers you can't hope to compete with, and yet, none of them have any hope of ever truly beating you. It makes for a very relaxing experience. One that I definitely needed seeing as how I'd severely overstrained Human.exe today.

It was due to the fight with the heroes of course. The vampire swarm was dangerous, but it was also predictable. For all their cunning and tool use, vampires were still organisms that followed their base instincts. Attack when you have the advantage, run when you don't, the most complicated aspect of them was how they were willing to accept higher risk actions to save their young offspring, something I was quickly beginning to realize was probably a baseline trait of all or most organisms.

Humans though, they were truly complicated. The fact that they both followed their instincts, and also constantly evaluated and judged those same instincts, meant they could be following a predictable course of action right up until they weren't. Throw in group dynamics, and random powers, and rectangles, and blah blah blah, and now I was so mentally strained I was even having difficulty figuring out how to trigger the peanut throwing ritual.

Luckily, I could just eat from the can.

I somewhat wanted to turn Human.exe off for today, but I had too

much data to analyze and there was still the threat that someone would find us at the safehouse, or on our way back to base. For now, I passed the time playing Gribblin Tamer with Mikey, while collating all the data I'd gathered today. First up was comparing the vampire fight to previous fights with swarming enemies.

The rat swarm fight: I was low on resources, and had decent, but ultimately unsatisfactory fighting skills at the time. The rats would have torn me limb from limb through sheer numbers until I lacked the resources to maintain function, and likely would have destroyed my core completely. Nicole saved me.

The stitch-rat swarm fight: My fighting skills were satisfactory during this encounter, and I had the resources to maintain my combat efficiency throughout the fight. Working with Imp and Nicole also helped reduce resource consumption and increase efficiency for this fight. However, the swarm eventually forced me to retreat once the will-o-wisp entered the scenario.

The vampire swarm fight: I was nearly entirely satisfied with my combat skills during this fight. Only minor miscalculations were made once the vampires began their final charge, and I was at no real risk throughout the encounter. The key here was prepping excess micro units beforehand, and having the skills and tools necessary to survive the swarm long enough to implement my plan. Socket's armaments, Adder's training, and Nicole's biological enhancements were the keys to turning a potentially dangerous scenario into a near triviality.

As for the new enhancements from this encounter, the vampire bodies hadn't given much, as my current organs and chitin composites far outdid theirs (and the eggs were meh: too watery), but the blood was an interesting element . It's sweet taste was due to

increased sugar content, which this blood variant was exceptionally good at transferring, and thus, immediately beneficial to me. The problem with it was that it wasn't meant for an endoskeletal organism, as its qualities also made it rather oily and thick in comparison to human blood. Perfect for lubricating and providing pressure for exoskeletal joints, but not for quick blood flow, which was another quality I valued.

It was another temptation to switch back to an exoskeletal system. Flexible chitin, plus foldable muscle, plus vampire blood would make for an excellent combination, and being able to contain organs within a shell made shifting them easier since I wouldn't need to worry about spillage. On the other hand, there were decent advantages to an endoskeleton. Heat venting was much easier, joint flexibility was easier to modify, and most important of all, I'd already established my disguise as looking like a base human, which was the easiest to remain unnoticed with. My 'identity' was of a powered human as far as members of HH knew, and I had several acquaintances outside of HH who knew me as human. Switching now carried several social risks, as some in HH who knew I wasn't a mutant may become angered that I was pretending to be one, and outside acquaintances may break alliance with me if they thought I'd become one. None of it was life-threatening, but it could potentially upend my entire social network, which I had become increasingly attached to, and which I was increasingly reluctant to risk. The thought of having to restart an entire new network of social acquaintances was... oh. Ohhh.

This must be similar to how humans felt when they were afraid of mutating. This feeling of 'dread'. Fascinating. I was under no physical threat, and yet... but Human.exe still... I... I should shut down Human.exe and calculate the disguise options without it. Just in case it was adversely affecting my decision making. But not yet. I still had so much data to review.

I filed that thought away for later and moved on to the fights with

the heroes. These had been... semi-successful. On the one hand, I was pleased with my successes in countering each heroes' individual power and combat style; however, on reviewing the data and the recordings, it was clear to me that the heroes had been controlling the overall situation almost entirely.

Upon finding me carrying Briarstone, the heroes had based their entire plan around recovering their incapacitated teammates, and separating us minions. Suprex's opening tackle had both moved me farther away from the vulnerable Briarstone, and separated me from Zaps, my only real combat capable ally. From there, I managed to beat Suprex in a solo engagement, but I was then cornered by the teamwork of Brick and Magenta, which would have resulted in my arrest if not for the timely intervention of Warhead. One hero after another until I was eventually cornered. Swarms *of* powerful individuals. Quantity *and* quality. This is what caused me to overtax Human.exe; constant new combat data to interpret, as well as the need to correlate human culture concepts to real-life scenarios, and at the same time I was overclocking my response reactions. It seemed humanity was already one step ahead of me, and had already developed a counter to an entity such as myself. I wasn't back at square one, but this problem was more complicated than the previous challenges. More complicated than swarms. More complicated than keyfabe. More complicated than the peanut ritual. More complicated than rectangles... well, maybe not that complicated.

Thought process instability detected.

But I had too many ideas to shut down yet! First was simply better teamwork with HH. Only having Zaps and I as the combat capable supers on this excursion turned out to be a detriment, as our teamwork was lacking. I would need to formulate better matchups for teams. Did the lieutenants already do that? I should check. Or practice with Zaps... or not. I don't like getting zapped. But I do like peanuts! But not the wikis! They were lacking completely! They

definitely needed to be updated and formatted and reorganized and their structure currently made no sense! And I would need to start killing supers in the surrounding areas that were detrimental to me. The wiki map of assigned locations would help. But I would make it better. With teamwork! Countering hero swarms relied on my ability to calculate teammates abilities and reactions in response to surrounding threats but they were ultimately outside my control and this was unacceptable as that meant I may not be able to deal with threats and threats and threats that were all around and around me everywher-

"Hey, Tofu? Are you alright man?"

I blinked, and looked up from my phone.

"Yes Mikey? I'm fine? Why do you ask?"

"You kinda, spaced out there man. Your guy is just spinning in circles."

I looked back down at the phone. He was right. I'd just been mindlessly moving the character back and forth. That was odd.

"Uh. Sorry Mikey. I guess I... um..." *I couldn't think of an excuse!*

"Hey man. If you need to like, take a break we can. You've been going full steam all day."

"Full steam? I have trouble with metaphors Mikey."

"...Dude. You are fried. Tired. Maybe you should just lay down."

"But, we aren't completely safe until we get back. There were so many supers. It's possible we could be getting tracked right now, and if they found us and I was sleeping..."

"Then it would take less than a second for you to spring into motion, like always. Dude. Go rest. I'll keep watch if you're worried."

"...You'll stay alert? Promise?"

"Sure dude. Cross my heart and hope to die."

"WHAT!?"

"I, that's not, it's a metaphor! I promise I'll look out! Go! Go rest."

"...Alright."

This heart-crossing thing somewhat worried me, but Mikey was right. I was indeed tired, so I found a good spot in the back of the small recharge station, and turned off Human.exe for a nap.

"Tofu? You in here?" asked Pebbles, entering the room. "We gotta go pick up Buzzer."

"I'm here."

"GAH! What the hell are you doing under there?"

"Taking a nap." A good one too, I was thinking a lot better now. It seems Zaps had the correct idea about taking a nap after work.

I pulled myself out from underneath the couch, and followed Pebbles to the main room with the others.We did a last check to make sure we weren't leaving evidence behind, and then followed Pebbles back to the van. Pebbles had been checking it over while I napped, and assured that he had found no tracking devices. We drove off, heading to pick up Buzzer and then head back to E13.

"You feeling better?" asked Mikey.

"Yes. Thank you for keeping watch."

"Ha, no worries man."

It was reassuring to have Mikey along, as I considered him to be the most reliable of the people with me. While my musings before my nap had been garbled, one thing was clear. For the foreseeable future I would need to rely on my allies. A 'hero swarm' was not something I could currently tackle by myself. To that end, I needed to stabilize the region around E13. According to other minions' assurances, E13 had never gone through an Odd Summer without a lockdown, a fact that I found worrying. This recent lockdown would likely not be the last I went through, so the area around E13 needed to be modified to accommodate me. That meant heroes who were strong enough to quickly control a lockdown situation, but not capable of uprooting Hellion's Henchmen, and not a personal threat to myself.

Brick, Magenta, and Turbo, the current E13 team, were all fine. Their restraint shown so far made me believe I had no need to fear them killing me, and of the three I was reasonably sure I could kill Turbo and Brick if I had to. Magenta's forcefield presented a difficulty, as it was much stronger than I initially thought. It seemed to react in direct relation to the force applied to it, and if it could withstand Warhead, then I had no hope of breaking it. Still, she had followed proper hero apprehending procedures, so I would rather keep her in E13 than have an untested super transfer in for now. From here on out, I'd try to keep my relations with the three of them... cordial.

E12 also seemed fine. Suprex was especially fine, as his power seemed to actively *prevent* lethal damage, while leaving him easily strong enough to deal with a lockdown situation. If only they could

all have powers like his. Ferrosa and Hydrox seemed fine from what I had seen of them, and I had never met Dark Gauntlet before his death. Someone named Meristo was the final member of E12's team, but I hadn't seen them during the lockdown, nor did they appear on any of the news footage. The wiki was decidedly unhelpful as well...

That left the other surrounding sectors around E13:

NE12: Essetec, Braggan. Reported as a four person team.

NE13: Avos (deceased), Briarstone (transferred in?), Toptop, Mable (transferred out?)

NE14: No Data. Reported as a three person team.

E14: No Data. Reported as a two person team.

SE12: BB3, Tork, CakeCake (note:prioritize).

SE13: Craggle, Dormouse, missing third member.

SE14: No Data. Reported as three person team.

The wikis were severely out of date. I now understood it was a mistake on my part to have depended on them, but I hadn't expected it to be this bad considering knowledge of surrounding heroes was something human civilians took an interest in. I expected them to upkeep the entries like Tim would, but it seemed only the 'popular' heroes had well maintained entries, while others were barely mentioned by name, if that. More than one sector simply had the amount of heroes working there.

I needed alternate sources of data. Unfortunately, it seemed Central rather liked the state of affairs, as official sources were also no good. Forget information on assigned sectors, let alone powers. The Central databank was a simple list of hero names with a picture I.D. of them in costume, and that was it. Likely Central knew exactly where their heroes were stationed, but they didn't want the general populace

(and villains) having unfettered access to that information. I needed reliable information, which meant I needed to contact Jasper, the information broker, but there had been difficulties getting a hold of him. The phone number he left me after our last encounter was out of service now. Perhaps Sandra would know? Or maybe Viper.

We reached the building where Buzzer was being kept, and quietly collected him. He wasn't wearing his minion mask anymore, having exchanged it for a domino mask. The bandages around his head likely had something to do with it.

"That helps with your concussion?" I asked.

"Don't know, don't care. Damn quack. Pebbles, drive. I want this shitty sector in the rearview mirror."

"HA! Damn straight!"

"Agh, not so loud."

"Ah, right, my bad."

"And...." Buzzer trailed off for a second. "Thanks for coming to get me guys."

"AWWWWWWW, he does care. No worries buzzy bee, you know we love you too," said Zaps, in a sing-song voice.

"CALL ME BUZZY BEE AGAIN, AND I"LL THROW YOU IN A BATHTUB, YOU DEFUNCT TOASTER!!" yelled Buzzer, clutching his head in agony soon after.

Zaps just laughed, and Pebbles drove the van out of the alley.

"No worries," said Pebbles, "we'll be back in E13 before you know it. A quick stop at the base to get things sorted and then we can get you to a proper doctor."

"Screw that. I just dodged death half a dozen times in less than twenty-four hours. I need a drink," said Buzzer.

"Uh, you sure that's a good idea with the concussion?"

"I said drive damn it! Ashwood Street. Red Zone. Let's fucking *go*."

"Alright alright. Glad to see you're feeling better."

"I'll feel better when I have a beer in me."

"Red Zone it is. Buckle up buttercups."

"Don't we need to pick up Richard first?" I asked. We were supposed to be escorting him.

"Richard?... Shit!" yelped Pebbles, "The lawyer! Almost forgot. Nice save there; can you imagine what Sandra would do to us if we came back without him?

"She would likely make us fill out reports."

Pebbles shuddered, "A fate worse than death."

Now that *had* to be a metaphor.

Mikey made the call, and it turned out to be a non-issue. Richard had already arranged alternate transport since he would be staying at the police station to "hammer them for losing his client," which would have more impact if Buzzer stayed gone. In the best case scenario, the minion known as 'Buzzer' would be declared dead, which meant the next time Buzzer got arrested, it would reset his strikes record, since "obviously" it would be a new person using Buzzer's codename and not the old Buzzer. A complicated bit of manipulation, but one that

would definitely help Buzzer if it paid off (it seemed he had an extensive minion record so far).

That solved, we headed to Ashwood St. The van blended in easily with the 'tour buses' and other traffic heading for E13, and soon enough we parked in a suitable garage, before heading up to the Red Zone level. Buzzer led the way, passing by many bars and restaurants where we could have stopped for his beer. Finally, he stopped in front of a large establishment, with four rather serious looking door guards wearing suits checking a line of waiting patrons. Above the door, in blazing neon lights that gave off an aura of intense chromatic purple to my eyes, was the name of the establishment: the "Cyborg Panda."

"Welcome to paradise newbies," announced Pebbles.

"Uh, isn't this... a strip club?" asked Mikey, hesitantly.

"Best one in the Zone. Come on, let's not let Zaps get too far ahead of us." Indeed, Zaps had already cut to the front of the line, and the bouncers let him through with a respectful nod.

Pebbles herded Mikey and I through the door, following after Buzzer. There was a darkened hallway immediately inside, which led to a second set of doors that opened up into the establishment proper. We didn't get two feet through the second pair of doors before-

"Pebbles! It's been *ages!* Where *have* you been?... oh, hello *Buzzer*," said a woman with a complete set of red scales encasing her body. I could tell because her dress left little unrevealed.

"HA! Hello there Ruby. Play nice with Buzzer, he's had a hell of a day. Amber around by any chance?"

"Phooey. Already thinking of other girls?"

"Aw baby you know you're my favorite. But I owe Buzzer and the boys here a good time, we just got out of that lockdown in E12. Think you could help me with that? Give them the tour?"

"Ohmigosh! You were in there? I'm so glad you're all okay! Here, this way boys. Let's get you settled in. The bar is on your right, just let the girls know what you want and they can bring it to you. Main stage is on your left, but we'll get you to the private booths. If you want to try any 'party favors' we have almost everything, but some of it's restricted until Odd Summer's over of course. Over here we have..."

Ruby continued to explain the services available in the Cyborg Panda, but I was already planning my exit. I really didn't like this place. It was just... tactically unsound. There were bright flashing lights, neon signs, smoke machines, and many shadowed nooks and crannies that made keeping sight of all possible threat vectors impossible. Not to mention that it was also crowded, and nearly all of the employees and most of the customers were mutants, and combat models on top of that. The work respectable 'personal bubble' described to me by the sensitivity trainer was not being observed here at all. Then there were the drugs, or "party favors" as Ruby called them. Supposedly only the "safe drugs" were available to normal humans, but everything I'd heard about drugs and trigger events had been bad news. Even Mikey's school had warned the students about it before they were released for Odd Summer. Did I trust that every patron here would follow the rules on which drugs they may or may not consume? Considering there were several people dancing on tables with their ties wrapped around their heads: no, I did not. Worst of all was what Ruby described as a "lap dance," which sounded like the best way to get stabbed by an unknown weapon I'd heard of so far. That much extended contact with an organism you weren't trying to kill? Ew. Hugs and handshakes at least had the excuse of being mercifully brief, and were required in some situations to solidify normal social bonds.

I didn't really understand this place. Supposedly it was to be able to view underdressed females in a live setting? But why would anyone risk themselves in such a hazardous environment just to look? Maybe I could excuse the humans' illogical behavior if it was their instinctual programming forcing them to attempt to mate and produce offspring, but that wasn't allowed here according to Ruby, so what was the point? Of any of this? The nap I took helped me stabilize Human.exe, but apparently it wasn't long enough, because I just wasn't getting it. At least Mikey was acting logical, staying wide-eyed while nervously scanning for danger. He seemed just as unable as I was to determine where he should be looking to see incoming threats, and his face and ears were turning bright red as he blushed, likely his body's attempt to increase blood flow and help his brain vent heat faster. Poor guy was likely overstraining his processing power; he hadn't taken a nap, and humans weren't very good at overclocking.

"U-uh, Pebbles?" whispered Mikey, "I um, I'm not sure this is really my thing. I think I'm going to go."

"Aw, you sure? I'm buying the first round."

"Actually Pebbles," I began, "I also think I..."

"...and over here is the all-you-can-eat-buffet," said Ruby, "You can serve yourself or ask someone to get you a plate. Over here is..." I didn't hear the rest of what she said.

Reassessing risk to reward ratios...

Within acceptable parameters.

"...would like to stay for dinner."

After all. Henching makes you hungry.

Sidedish #7 Food For Thought

New Dawn Inc.

"Beginning live combat test three."

Hydraulics opened the doors in the test chamber, and a black bear wandered forth. It was one of the larger examples of its species, made even more intimidating by the fact that its fur bunched and bundled across its body, forming what looked, and acted like, a coating of nearly iron hard spikes. This particular specimen had already awakened a power.

Across from it, what looked like a large crustacean emerged from the opposite wall. The crab-like organism took one look at the bear and stopped moving, but whether it was attempting to avoid the bear, or play dead, its plan didn't work; the bear wasn't having it. The bear roared and charged, approaching the crustacean creature with all the fury of its six-hundred pound frame. The crustacean immediately sprung into motion, the top of its shell flipping forward like a car hood opening and hitting the bear in the face, causing it to stumble and huff in surprise more than pain. It wasn't surprised for long, and batted the shield of chitin to the side so hard the attaching tendons and muscle ripped, detaching it from the crustacean.

But the crustacean was prepared. As the shield went flying, a swarm of needle-tipped tendrils whipped forward from the opened top of the crab body and stabbed the bear in the eyes, blinding it. The bear went wild, raking its arms at its opponent in an attempt to dislodge the tendrils it could no longer see, but every time the tendrils withdrew as a paw came flying, and then stabbed forward to attack the bear's face once again.

The bear panicked, and attempted to shuffle backwards, but now it was the crustacean that wasn't having it. It kept pace with the bear, keeping tendrils in contact with its face to pump a solution filled with nanites into the bear's ruined face, and it wasn't long before said nanites managed to reach and attack the brain of the bear, killing it quickly. Its spiky-fur power hadn't even managed to come into play.

"Time. Fifty seven seconds," said the scientist recording the test.

The team went into motion, making sure that the data was recorded properly by the machines in their new setup. They'd all practiced with them before restarting the tests, but considering they had been working with an entirely different system of paper printouts and analog machines the first time around, their apprehensiveness about getting the data recordings right was an understandable concern. After all, animals with powers they could use as test subjects didn't grow on trees... or, well, if they did, the mad bio-tinker who must have made them wasn't sharing. The team nervously looked towards their leader, who sat hunched over a machine with lines of code rapidly scrolling across its screen.

"...That did it. Good job everyone," said Brett Savvy.

The team members let out muted cheers and congratulations, before turning back to their work. Brett took a brief moment to enjoy the atmosphere of a lab in full swing before doing likewise.

It was only gone for a little while, but I missed this.

He watched the lines of code scroll by on the screen, every now and then pausing the feed to rewind and take a closer look at what was happening. Before, if he wanted to do this he would have needed to dig his way through the printouts, as the digital code being called only displayed for an instant before the record was transferred to hardcopy. The old method was one of several anti-technopath countermeasures, one meant to prevent a passing technopath from having access to a digital layout of the code. Brett had gotten rather good at reading the code on the first try as it flew by, but he still missed stuff, and often went digging through piles of printouts for hours. He was glad to not have to deal with that anymore. The new lab was remote enough and guarded enough to not need such measures.

Which meant he now had the proper tools available to spot the obvious. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

"Penny for your thoughts Brett?" asked Dr. Mason, as he walked up behind Brett. He hadn't been in the lab when they were getting started.

"Didn't we have that long discussion about live testing precautions Dr. Mason?" responded Brett, ignoring Dr. Mason's question. "The one where we decided non-essential personnel shouldn't be around dangerous test subjects during Odd Summer?"

"Oh psh, looks like the test is already over to me," said Dr. Mason, smiling, "Come now. This was the most successful test yet, and yet you look like someone stuck a finger in your petri dish. What's got you in knots?"

Brett rolled his eyes at Dr. Mason's kind-hearted flippancy, but he supposed Dr. Mason was right. They were using already triggered animals for the test now for safety, and the new prototype (dubbed the mark two) was working as expected.

Which was sort of the problem.

"We managed to get the recording equipment properly calibrated with this test. I was able to follow the logic path just fine, but the thing is, all it really does is tell me what I already know from just watching the damn thing. The mark two is showing the same level of proficiency as the original prototype was following the fight with the grizzly, and I can't find any real difference between the kernel process recorded in our most recent back ups and the new model's. Somehow, the prototype's combat and pathfinding abilities advanced by a *massive* leap during that original fight, and I *don't know* why. Forget figuring out how it did what it did in the Trebla footage, I can't figure out how it got so good at stabbing bears. For all we know this thing will go awol just like the mark one did, so I'm thinking of putting a pause on all combat testing until we figure this out."

Dr. Mason cringed, "Ah... then I suppose now is a bad time to tell you New Dawn's president is coming by for a tour?"

The lab went silent, wide-eyed technicians turning to Dr. Mason.

"...What?"

"New Dawn's president. He will be coming by later today."

"That's... rather short notice."

"I'm inclined to believe that is on purpose. I tried to rush here after I got the call but, old bones and all that," he smiled apologetically, "Sorry I couldn't get here before you killed the bear."

"No, that's alright, we can just, um..." Brett looked around the lab, taking in the scene. Frankly the lab was a mess. They'd plunged back into live testing as fast as possible, under the assumption that Odd Summer might be crucial to worthwhile results, and they hadn't wanted to waste their window. Half of their equipment hadn't even

been properly organized yet, haphazardly set up throughout the lab wherever they had space. Filing cabinets were pushed into one corner, half-finished coffee cups rested on tables, and their mark two was nibbling on the dead bear in the background, probably ruining any results they could get off the corpse in the process.

Screw it. Showtime then.

"Alright, you heard the man. We've got..."

"About four hours," supplied Dr. Mason.

"Two hours to turn this into a respectable operation. We'll let the mark two eat the bear, make sure its reserves are topped up. Then Dr. Janice, I want you to put it through its paces, critical thinking skills, obstacle course, the works. Make sure the upload of the back-ups took properly, but nothing that can break it; let's assume he'll want to see a combat demonstration. Jacobson, Grentle, start up the clam. If we time it right we might be able to show it to him in action; might as well give him the complete pitch. Everyone else, help me put this lab in order, and for gods' sake throw your coffee cups away before they spill and fry something."

The team scattered to their tasks, setting to them with a vigor that bordered on manic. This was their second chance after the disaster with the prototype, and they all knew that this "tour" could easily make or break the project permanently. They'd all had a brief taste of life without the lab, and none of them wanted to return to the cubicle hells, or endless job searches again. The best they could hope for right now was perhaps a teaching or tutoring position at a college, and the fight for those positions was tooth and nail this far into Odd Summer. No, this was the dream, and they'd be damned if they didn't grab it while they could.

Brett himself helped with the clam, since his power was needed to start things up, then he started moving equipment and cleaning the place up, since the need to monitor the mark two's kernel process right now was not as pressing as showing a good front to their soon-to-be guest. Instead, he used the time doing physical work to zone out, and go over what needed doing in his head. He wasn't sure how the president would react to the project; he'd only ever seen the man in pictures or brief interviews in documentaries and the like. The man had built New Dawn Inc. from the ground up over a decade ago, using the bolter as its flagship product, and the company was now on the bleeding edge of weapons technology. They should probably start with a demonstration of the mark two, try and impress him with the actual combat results? Then try and sell him on the viability of the project as a commercial success to seal the deal. Hopefully the clam would be almost finished by the time he showed up.

"Beginning puzzle box test one," called out Janice.

Brett glanced over at the mark two for a moment. The machine had reformed the top of its shell using the bear remains, and was now using its claws and two tendrils to maneuver the 'puzzle box', a square cube with various buttons and symbols on its surface. Idly he watched as it tried to figure out how to open the box, whereupon it would receive a nutrient pellet as positive reinforcement. Its two large claws slowly turned the puzzle box, allowing the mark two to see which symbols lit up, and then push the corresponding buttons on the other sides of the cube. So simple a child could do it, but right now the critical thinking skills of a child was the mark two's very best. It took eight minutes before the AI figured out it needed to match both the colors *and* shapes of the symbols to the buttons, and then another minute to press them in the right order, whereupon Janice announced the time.

"Time. Nine minutes, seven seconds."

Well at least that's working properly.

Brett went back to wrestling the particularly heavy gizmo he'd picked to a better spot. They'd left it near the door due to its weight, but it really needed to be further along the wall so he wasn't constantly walking to it from his work station.

What was our record for the puzzle test? Five minutes twenty seconds? But that was before we started randomizing the sequence better.

It was a shame that the prototype hadn't taken to puzzles the way it had combat, but then, the mental jump from following base instincts to complex problem solving wasn't exactly an easy one. Brett and Dr. Mason were a molecular engineering major and a microbiologist respectively, so when they'd been forced to shift the project from "nanites that stopped mutavus" to "nanites that controlled an autonomous weapon," they had gone with what they knew. The nanite core system was modeled on living organisms, and that meant the instinct for base survival had to come wayyy before the ability to recognize that a glowing blue circle meant you pressed the blue circular button, at least, if you wanted the nanite system to function as desired. Evolution had taken billions of years to get from simple molecular machines to complex-problem solving *life*, and yet they'd done so in less than two years thank-you-very-much, so perhaps they could be forgiven for making a crab with the intellect of a dull one year old.

"Beginning puzzle box test two."

Kinda funny how all the prototypes become crustaceans though. What did Mason call it? Carcinogeneration? Crancentination?... Crabification?

Brett snorted at the idle thought. Their method of training the prototypes had also modeled real organisms, which meant they'd needed to teach the machines to eat food and keep living, the basics of basics. The first nanite colonies had been placed in nutrient solution, and needed to be hard-coded by Brett to take in the right chemicals and keep the reaction going. Then he'd needed to hard-code the pathfinding when they placed the nanites *next* to the "food" and not directly in it. Then he'd need to design a way for the nanites to "remember" useful structures, and for that it became apparent that the nanites needed a dedicated core, and etcetera and etcetera.

And then began live testing with cellular structures. Good lord that had been a debacle. Up until that point the project was still Dr. Mason's anti-mutavus garage project. Brett and the other members of the team were collected from different colleges, master's programs, wherever Dr. Mason could find them. Heck, the only other actual doctor on the team was Janice, an animal psychology and behavior analyst.

"Time. seven minutes, nine seconds."

And we're damned lucky she gave us the time of day. She could be predicting fauna migration for the army and earning a pretty penny right now.

They'd made steady progress on the nanites, even with working between classes and other real-life situations, but then the project stalled hard upon introducing the nanites to living cells. Even the most basic of single-celled organisms could contain *thousands* of

interlocking mechanisms, and the nanites had taken *for-ev-er* to finally duplicate a *single* amoeba. That had been three whole weeks of painfully monitoring and guiding and husbanding the nanites to make sure the algorithms didn't just determine the process a waste and give up prematurely. But finally, they had a nanite colony that could mimic and replicate amoebas... and nothing else.

"Beginning puzzle box test three."

He'd adjusted the next batch of nanites to give it more memory for recording cell types, but even that was too much for them. Sure they could finally "record" complex structures like living cells, but they needed to learn *each* cell type from scratch, and actually understanding how bone, blood, muscle, and nerve cells all worked in concert? Forget about it. Brett could have spent the rest of his life adjusting the nanites and they would have never reached a complexity above mobile slime mold. Great if you wanted a living, slimey roomba to patrol your apartment at the speed of drying paint, but if you wanted nanites that harmlessly interacted with a complex living being to root out mutavus? Pfft. The project predictably stalled there. Six months of amazing progress just to hit a brick wall.

"Time. Five minutes, thirteen seconds."

Oh, but Dr. Mason had swooped in and saved the day there. Somehow he convinced New Dawn Inc. that the project had merit as a weapons program, and right afterwards New Dawn had delivered *the sample*. That miraculous sample of mutant animal cells that made everything possible. These anomalous cells could shift from muscle cell, to nerve cell, to skin cell and more as commanded, like stem cells that never lost their charge, so the nanites only needed to learn a *single* one-size-fits-all design. Even better, and easily most crucial, was the fact that the cells *taught each other*. If one cell shifted, it could

also transmit its changes to the next cell and the next. Suddenly Brett didn't need to guide the learning process for every new design, because the nanites would mimic the cells, and *then the cells would teach the nanites*, the learning process bouncing back and forth billions of times, *trillions* of times. Trillions of minute instances of trial-and-error learning, more than Brett could do by himself in a thousand lifetimes, and the prototypes had advanced exponentially from there.

"Beginning puzzle box test four."

Even the core signal concept was perfected from this advancement, providing a fast way to transmit commands from the core to the body, and receive feedback from the cells quickly. The fact that it reinforced the fail-safe at the same time was like a gift from the gods.

Or perhaps not a gift, and more like Prometheus's stolen fire. Just like mankind took that flame and eventually used the sciences to disprove the Greek pantheon, Brett and his team would use the mutavus created cells to eventually eradicate mutavus... hopefully. If he could get benedicci to stop destroying his nanites for two seconds and let them do their job rooting out mutavus' hiding spot. Ironic that humanity's best defense against mutavus was now hindering their chance at a complete cure. He was *so close!* He just needed one last push. One last key to the puzzle. What was he *missing*?

"T-time! Three minutes, four seconds..."

Maybe the rogue prototype was that key? If only he had access to it. He hadn't heard back from Mr. Slick since... *wait.*

"What was that?" asked Brett, his head snapping up from the console

he was fiddling with. Most of the lab reacted similarly to Janice's pronouncement.

"Three minutes, four seconds. I'm resetting it, it must be a fluke."

Brett and the rest of the team watched as Janice reset the puzzle and started the next test. She was probably right, but what a fluke! Three minutes was *half* of their best ever time. *No need to get hopes up though, it could be anything, from a faulty timer, to the randomizer screwing up, or maybe even-*

"T-Time. One minute, t-two seconds."

"...Janice? One more time please," asked Dr. Mason.

"Already ahead of you. Starting test six."

The mark two grabbed the puzzle box as the lights started up and damn near spun the thing like a basketball, four small eyes on stalks scanning the sides of the cube. It stopped the spin with one claw holding the first button in the sequence, then used three tendrils to rapidly press and hold the other three buttons in the lock combination. A panel on the bottom opening and a nutrient pellet fell into a waiting tendril.

"Time! *Thirty-seven seconds!* I don't believe it... starting test seven."

The lab watched in spellbound silence as the mark two spun the puzzle box again. It was a silent magician, performing a trick never before seen by human eyes. The lights flashed and suddenly: ta-da!

"*Time twenty-two seconds*! Starting test eight!"

The mark two grabbed the box, spun it... and then froze. Its audience *jerked* at the sudden stop to the show, small gasps of surprise and worry escaping as if they had already been expecting the hammer to fall. But no, the mark two was not dead, or broken, or stumped. All of its eyes were trained on a single side of the puzzle box.

The reward panel.

Slowly, one of its tendrils moved forward and tapped the panel, producing a dull ring. It waited a moment, then released one claw which it then smacked against the panel, nearly causing it to drop the cube from its one-clawed grip. Its eyes moved from the panel only briefly to take in the claw holding the cube. Then it set the contraption down on the floor, raised one claw *up*, and **hammered** it down onto the panel. Then again and again, until the panel warped and bent, and then the mark two really went at it, using claws to crush, tendrils to pull, and even stabbing a needle-like foot into a small gap to lever the panel open in a flurry of force. With a final twist and snap of one claw, the offending panel went flying.

Then it calmly picked the cube up, spun it once, and dumped the entire supply of nutrient pellets on the floor.

Ta-da!

The audience were stunned silent. Nobody moved, like they were afraid to do so would break the magic that had descended on the lab. It was Jacobson who finally couldn't take it anymore.

"What. The. **Fuck**."

That did it.

"The recording," said Brett, practically diving for his console. Everyone else reacted similarly as Brett started sputtering orders.

"Have it save state and download CoreMemory. Then put it into sleep mode. No, wait! Standby mode, in case the solution is temp memory related. Ben, Sally, start monitoring the live kernel process. But keep your eyes on the damn thing! Someone sit and stare if that's what it takes. We can't afford it going rogue on us. Jacobson, Grentle, start going over the kernel process recording. Separate consoles, ten minutes, I want your theories on when, why, and how its critical thinking skills started advancing. Everyone else, usual stations, start double checking *everything*.

Brett himself started going over the kernel memory at his own console, regretting they only had five of the gizmos they could use to watch the machine "think." Five had seemed like overkill at first, but now he wished he had a dozen. But, between himself, Jacobson, and Grentle they should be able to find what they were looking for. He kept scrolling back through the record. It was easy to see the acceleration, but where was the spark that set it off? He didn't see...

"Hey Brett?" called Ben, "It started a large-scale memory wipe before the download request went through."

"What timestamp?"

Ben repeated it and Brett scrolled forward to the indicated time, but didn't see any wipe command logged in the record.

"Are you sure it was a wipe?"

"Absolutely, I saw it dump... what? Where did it... but it was a huge section of memory! How... I *saw* it!" Now the technician was confused, and Brett wandered over to his console so the man could point out the exact time when he thought the wipe happened.

There's no wipe command logged here, but Ben wouldn't mistake any of these commands for a memory wipe. The hell is going on?

He looked down the list of commands issued by the core, and only saw what he expected to see when they requested a download of the core's memory. Admittedly there were lots of commands that the feed didn't display. For instance a "grow" command issued by the core wouldn't display the thousands of individual smaller commands that described the organ it was growing, nor the trillions upon trillions of cell replication commands inside those. Trying to display all of those in a way a human could see and make sense of was a fool's errand, so Brett had long ago designed the core to "group" the commands and display them as a single action for ease of visibility. Was that a mistake? Did he need to go back and redesign it to display more? But then they would need to comb through a massive list of records. Even with the one or two people on the team who had a power that might help with that sort of thing, it would take too long.

Brett checked the file for CoreMemory now in their backups, but the file size of the core's memory state was also normal. It had grown a bit since their last check, but was still well within the estimated average, so what happened to all the data that was supposedly wiped? Ben was going bonkers while fretting over his console, certain

that he had seen the mark two's core wipe a large section of memory before providing the backup.

"Here! Right here," said Ben finally, jabbing at his screen, "The timestamps. It issues a transfer, then does the cleanup, but the timestamps between the two are *whole seconds* apart. It transferred something big, then didn't record the wipe. Or, no wait, I think it grouped it into the clean-up command, the timestamp there is also a bit longer until the next command."

"So it transferred the data, deleted its copy, then hid the evidence in plain sight, which means its actively hiding something from us. That means the entire record is... well, not useless, but suspect. Wipe and clean-up are similar enough that you could define them in the same action, but when did it redefine the parameters? How?"

"...Or *who*," offered Ben, "It transferred data somewhere, and it wasn't to another spot in its memory. Maybe it really was a technomancer? Stealing the data and hiding his tracks?"

"We can't rule that out, but we're in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a shielded facility, protected by armed guards. If they were powerful enough to steal data at this range they could have just taken what they wanted right off our new computers and there would be nothing we could do about it. No, the mark two is hiding things for a reason, we just need to figure out what and why."

The team pored over the code fast now that they had a better idea of what they were looking for. They started to find more odd instances like the hidden wipe command. Mislabeled temp variables, calls to functions that were then immediately canceled, commands that were repeated multiple times but which never wound up doing anything; all things that weren't unexpected in dynamic code generated by an A.I. up until you realized that none of it was random. The others might have taken days to put it all together, but Brett had designed

the lowest level of assembly himself, and had spent weeks, *months* going over the records of the prototype's highest level thoughts. He knew *what* it was thinking, *how* it was thinking... just not the *why*. Brett probably would have gotten it on his own eventually, but as luck would have it, he glanced up briefly, his eyes idly drawn to the mark two.

It was staring right back at him. He blinked, and the little eye on a stalk wasn't there anymore, all four of its simple eyestalks turned away to stare at the room as it idled in standby mode. It had glanced away like a child caught peeking.

... It's been watching us the entire time. The entire lab is visible to it and its been transferring data somewhere. The way its been modifying its code and hiding it from us is outside of its scope, but not if someone's been doing all the clever thinking for it. Occam's razor. Ben was right. Someone's been playing us the fool.

Brett clenched his teeth at the bitterness he felt in that moment. All that progress, and it wasn't because of all the work they put into this project. It was because some *asshole cowl* had decided their project would be a good toy to play with. Likely Trebla, if that video he put out was anything to go by. Laughing in their faces.

He took a deep breath to try and get a handle on himself before continuing, then stomped his way over to the viewing window.

"Janice? I need you to order the mark two back to its pen. Then put it in biopsy mode and pop the core."

"Brett?"

"Someone's been talking to our project. I'm putting an end to it."

Janice gave him one worried look before interacting with her console and having the mark two leave the test chamber for its pen. Brett started marching for the security door that would let him access the pen himself.

"Um, Brett?" said Dr. Mason, coming up behind him quickly, "Let's not do anything hasty."

"I'm not. Someone's been messing with the prototypes, and the most likely vector is the communications module. Everything we do here is pointless unless its turned off, and I intend to make *sure* it's off."

"Alright, but are you sure its wise to get so close to the mark two when you're so sure it's been tampered with?"

That caused Brett to falter. He stopped and turned to the concerned Dr. Mason, who directed his gaze to the remains of the dead bear. There were a few scraps of fur, cartilage, and bone left, but not much else; the mark two was quite thorough with its meal.

"...Right."

Fifteen minutes later, Brett entered the mark two's pen with six guards armed with bolters, who took positions around the waiting mark two (which was *much* larger up close), and then waved at Janice through the glass to trigger the biopsy. When she did, the mark two shuddered and twitched, requiring Brett to calm the guards before they shot it. Internal and external changes were required to expose the core, and it wasn't always pretty. They didn't need a stray bolt taking out the core because it surprised them with a jump scare. He somewhat expected the mark two to open the top of its shell again, and for the core to pop out like a bloody jack-in-the-box.

Eventually the mark two stopped twitching, and contrary to what Brett expected, the mouthparts opened wide, wider, and then a large part of the internal structure emerged from within. The guards muttered expletives at the scene, and Brett was inclined to join them, because it wasn't the core that emerged.

It was a human brain.

Brett froze. Then blinked. Then turned to the lab window to see if the others saw what he saw. Many of his fellow scientists had their hands covering their mouths, or were making other varied expressions of surprise or horror, so they obviously understood the significance. Dr. Mason was already trying to restore order and heading for the pen himself.

Someone should tell him not to. Who knows what this means. It's not supposed to make brains, the core signal should hinder secondary processing centers. Where did it even get a human brain? Did some poor fool enter the pen and it... no, it must be whoever messed with it... right?... But that explains all the data transferred... All the hung calls to missing methods. And it used the brain to redefine the parameters... That's why it suddenly got so good with the puzzle box! It ate the whole bear and finally had the reserves for the algorithms to justify operating at full capacity! Stabbing a bear isn't nearly as resource intensive for a brain as a puzzle. How smart is it now?

"Brett! Brett, don't do anything rash!" yelled Dr. Mason, emerging from the security door with several other panicked team members and interrupting Brett's stupor.

"Mm? Oh," he had been reaching for the brain without realizing it. He put his arm down. "No worries Mason, I wasn't going to... I think we might still be in business actually. This brain, it... it explains

everything. Almost everything. I'm just, not quite sure where to go from here."

Dr. Mason sighed in relief, "Well. We'll figure it out together."

After the initial shock ran its course, the team of scientists went back to work. Now that the mystery of the anomalous behavior was solved, several things needed to be determined. The biologists in their group were having a field day.

"So it's *not* a human brain?" asked a very relieved Brett.

"No, it just looks like it," scoffed Grentle. "Its similar, but look here, the temporal lobe is quite atrophied, frontal lobe engorged, and look at these connections between the cerebellum and the surrounding structures!"

"To decrease reaction time to stimulus perhaps," said Dr. Mason. "The core has replaced most of the brain stem here," he pointed, "It's become the central hub of the brain from the looks of it."

"That's how it's bypassed the secondary processing center limitation," said Sally, "It just grew the brain around itself, like adding extra ram to a computer. The brain isn't thinking, it's just enhancing the core's capabilities. We should have opened it up to look ages ago. This has so many applications for medical training."

"Admittedly there wasn't much point," said Grentle, "Besides the liver it's basically just a stomach with legs, or at least it was."

"Where did it get the design from though? It didn't eat some poor SOB, did it?" asked Brett.

"It might have copied and amalgamated all the animal brains it ate?" suggested Dr. Mason.

"Er, that's unlikely," hesitated Grentle. "It's not a human brain *now*, but it looks like it might have started with one as the base."

"Dammit man, I asked if it was a human brain!" said Brett.

"It isn't one!"

"Semantics!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. Who cares where it got a brain? Spilt milk at this point," said a new voice, and the scientists turned as one to the owner. The man it belonged to was quite out of place in the cement lab, with his immaculately trimmed full beard, long black hair streaked with silver and held in a stylish ponytail, and wearing what looked like a ridiculously comfortable maroon suit with matching golden cufflinks and watch, but they still recognized him from pictures.

It was New Dawn Inc.'s president. He was flanked by several people, all in dark suits, and one of whom was Mr. Slick.

"The more important question is does it still work? I'm no scientist, but last time I checked brains go on the inside," he laughed past an unlit cigar. "Allec Ruben, your boss. Nice to finally meet you folks in the flesh. Dr. Mason, good to see you, and you would be Brett Savvy, correct? Don't mind my entourage, they're just here for show. Although I think you've met Mr. Slick?" he gestured at the man over his right shoulder.

"Uh, y-yes. Brett Savvy, nice to meet you," he shook Allec's hand, which Brett imagined must feel much like shaking hands with the mark two. The president emanated controlled strength, despite the slight paunch indicative of age and a healthy appetite. New Dawn's president introduced himself with a handshake to everyone there, despite the fact that some of them had been poking a brain not moments ago.

"Now then, onto business. Hopefully I didn't come too late in the day to get a tour, it looks like you all were about to start dinner here," he laughed, deep and jovial.

"N-no of course not! Please, right this way," said Dr. Mason.

They all retreated back through the security door, and thankfully Dr. Mason took over speaking with Allec Ruben for a moment. Brett's nerves already felt close to shot for the day, and that was before he *forgot* about the demonstration they would be doing. The team swallowed their nerves, and went about setting up the mark two, having it withdraw from biopsy mode. Luckily, it seemed their discovery of the brain hadn't caused anything bad to happen, and Brett hoped the mark two wouldn't explode or otherwise before the tour ended.

They set up a combat test, with a large praying mantis twice the size of a man as the opponent. Size was the most commonly triggered power among insects, and mantids in particular were a dangerous threat beyond the city walls.

The mark two bodied it. Literally. It bull-rushed the mantid into a wall, pinning it, then methodically tore the limbs off the mantid, using nanites to saw off its armored limbs.

"Not bad," nodded Alecc, "Those things can usually take a few bolter rounds. Hope you don't mind, but I brought along something a bit spicier to test it with. Mr. Slick?"

Mr. Slick nodded and went to prep the mark two's next opponent, while the scientists set up the test again (while conveniently "forgetting" to stop the mark two from eating the mantis). Twenty

minutes later, three vampires entered the test area.

"Some of our boys picked these up earlier today. E12 was having a bit of a fire sale. Nasty things, and smarter than most people give them credit for. Let's see how it handles *that*."

The vampires entered the room much more timidly then the mantis had, eyeing the mark two with suspicion. The mark two did the same, taking the time to analyze these never before seen opponents. One of the vampires fanned its wings creating a subsonic hum, and its two companions separated to flank the mark two. It kept one eyestalk trained on each vampire, with the fourth flicking back and forth to whichever vampire hummed. It seemed unusually interested in the noise.

One of the vampires leaped forward with a feint, swiping near the mark two before rapidly backing off. The mark two stepped back as well, training two eyes on the offender, but held its ground afterwards, making no offensive moves.

"Bit slow this time, is it tired or something?" asked Allec, gesturing with his unlit cigar.

"It's never fought a vampire before. It tends to try and analyze new opponents for as long as possible before diving in."

"Huh, guess it does have a brain."

Inside the test chamber, two of the vampires decided to try a real attack on the mark two, and lept from opposing sides to swipe their claws along the mark two's shell, trying their claws against the material of the shell. Still, the mark two didn't respond to the

provocation, and Brett began to grow worried. Normally the prototypes all began fighting once their opponents did physical damage. He wished they'd been able to do more tests with it; this was the mark two's fifth actual fight since they'd loaded the backups on it.

The mark two continued its possum act, and the vampires were getting bolder with the strikes, carving long, if superficial, scratches on the mark two's shell. Finally, the mark two shuddered, which Brett recognized as it having finished internal changes, and from its mouth emerged a long flat tendril. It inflated, revealing it was a tube, and then the mark two did something really unexpected: It blew air through the tube, and produced a subsonic hum.

The vampires all jumped back, reacting dramatically to the sound, and retreated to the far end of the room. The mark two didn't follow, instead producing a series of different humming noises, slowly getting closer and closer to the vampire's own tones and frequencies. Soon, one of the vampires fanned its wings, and started to respond.

"By God, is it trying to *speak* to them?" said Dr. Mason, in a hushed tone. Several of the members on the team were excitedly whispering to each other, mentioning the puzzle tests, and how the mark two might be trying to decipher the vampire "language." An amazing advancement if it were true, one that several members of the team were ecstatic about.

But one person wasn't quite so exuberant, and he was the person they needed to impress.

"The hell's it doing?" asked the president.

"I believe its trying to talk to them," said Mr. Slick, at his side.

"Well it's supposed to be killing them. Can we tell it to get a move on or something?"

"We can," said Brett, "but it won't be necessary. Please, patience."

Allec Ruben raised an eyebrow at Brett, but shrugged and kept watching.

The vampires were getting bolder inside the chamber, slowly approaching the mark two while making their own communicative noises, to which the mark two responded. Slowly the trio advanced to investigate this strange vampire that had a large shell and stood squat to the ground. The scientists were fascinated by the interplay, especially Janice, the animal psychology analyst. Vampires were known to be somewhat solitary hunters and killers, so seeing three of them work together like this, and for the mark two to so easily decipher the "language" and attempt to "talk back" was a fascinating event. The day had been filled with magical discoveries for the team.

So it was somewhat a shame how brutally they were reminded exactly what it was they'd built.

The vampires drew close to the mark two, all four of them subsonically humming at each other. Then the first vampire drew close enough to try and smell the mark two with its antennae, and the mark two responded by extending two tendrils in a similar, but much more ill-intentioned display. When the vampire leaned in, the tendrils struck, wrapping around its throat and pulling it in close. Immediately the mark two's large crab-like claws latched to the vampire's face and *squeezed*, popping its compound eyes.

The vampires went berserk, the two other vampires attacking in a

frenzy of clawed hands in an attempt to save the dying third. The mark two didn't allow it, twisting its captive's neck to kill it fast, then opened the top of its shell to unleash its swarm of needle-tipped tendrils. Both attackers fended off the swarm of tendrils surprisingly well, using their four prehensile hands to grab clumps of tendrils behind the stabbing needle portion, and then extended their own needle-like proboscis into the mark two, attempting to drain and weaken it quickly. Less than five seconds after their first gulps, the mark two's blood self-destructed inside their gullets, and both vampires choked, convulsing in distress. The mark two's tendrils then quickly wrapped around their hands and pulled them inside in a reversal, and finally the open lid of its shell swung down, crushing and trapping them like a massive venus fly-trap. They quickly died soon after, and Brett let out the breath he had been holding.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" said the president, his statement nearly echoing in the now-silent lab. "It goddamn tricked them and everything. Did you teach it to do that?"

"Er, no. Not as such," replied Dr. Mason, "Brett? Could you...?"

"The mark two is programmed with an objective hierarchy, part of which is to try new tactics when appropriate. It likely just determined that mimicking the vampires was worth attempting, as it had never encountered the behavior before, and it was low cost to attempt. It didn't know what the result of the mimicry would be, it only took advantage of the result. As programmed," *for once. Even if it was rather... original.*

"Well, either way this looks like a winner to me. I'm impressed with how quickly you got all this up and running again, to think we almost cancelled it."

"That would be due to the extraneous costs involved," spoke one of the suits behind Allec, the first to speak up since they arrived. "The cost to acquire the vampires it just killed, for example, was just under two-hundred thousand dollars. With the cost of acquiring powered livestock, anti-technopath security measures, tinker made supplies and parts, and security and general staff for the facility, the overall

total balloons towards just under three million, for the past *three days.*"

"Oof, that is indeed quite the butcher's bill," guffawed Allec, "Anything to say towards that?" he asked Dr. Mason.

"Well, the scientific advancement alone is worth-"

"It's cheap," interrupted Brett. The group of suits turned to him. He pointed to the mark two. "That right there represents about three hundreds pounds of nanotech infused biomass, which translates to about three hundred fifty pounds of nutrient feed, or five hundred pounds of whatever you can get your hands on. Which means the two-hundred-thousand dollar vampires just got beat by about eight hundred dollars worth of grocery store quality cane sugar," then he pointed at the lab and team in general, "This is all start-up cost. We have some testing left to do, but the hardest parts are over. Now is when we move towards production, which is the second part of this tour. If you would all follow me?"

Allec Ruben grinned and nodded, and the group followed him out into the hall, and to another room. Inside the new room was mostly blank cement, but for a massive machine that dominated one wall. There was an opening and what looked a little like a water tank at one end, which then led to a spiraling series of large pipes and valves coiled into an almost snail-shell like mass, the entirety of which led to a simple, rectangular box.

"This is where we produce the cores that provide the anchor for the nanite swarms. We've taken to calling it the Carbon Lattice Applicator Machine, or C.L.A.M. for short. Seed molecules go into this tank here," he touched the water tank, " and then pass through this series of pipes and coils. Each pass adds a coating of atoms to the original seed. Correctly bound molecules eventually pass to the next ring of coils, while failures are rigorously disposed of. Eventually, the result is deposited here," he touched the final box, unclicking a latch that allowed him to swing up the lid, and revealing three small,

whitish cores. No two were exactly alike, but they were all mostly spherical, with several holes pocketing their surface, a small horn-like protrusion, and a single silverish filament extending from inside them.

"Heh, these must be the pearls," chuckled Allec.

"Basically yes. Any of these cores placed in or on suitable materials will begin to produce its own nanite swarm, and eventually grow its own body. We started the C.L.A.M. when we heard you were coming, which was about..." he checked his watch, "...six hours ago."

"Two hours per core?"

"Ehh, it varies. Because it relies on random chance for the molecules to coat properly, it tends to spit them out in odd clumps, but the average is around ten cores per day."

"That's not exactly mass production," said the suit from before.

Brett smiled, "The solution to that is simple: just build more clams."

"And how much would that cost?"

"This particular machine represents about... twenty thousand dollars in store bought parts, a hundred thousand dollars in raw materials provided by your company, and the combined efforts of twenty of the smartest people Dr. Mason could find, over the course of two years. Luckily you've already paid for that last one. That means you can make one of these machines for the price of a rather expensive car. Yes, acquiring the test subjects is the main cost of the project. Yes, the resources spent over the last two years is presumptuous. But most of those costs have already been paid, the math is done, and the most important point, the thing that makes this machine a viable product, is that it is *not* a tinker artifact. It uses actual logic in its design. When we started the project the goal was to not make something that would become defunct the moment its creator passed. Any team of engineers can put this design together with the blueprint, and any tinker with two brain cells to rub together can reproduce the

specialized parts."

"Then what stops someone from stealing this device? Or just making it for themselves?"

"The seed molecules required to start the process. Right now my molecular manipulation power is the only way to reproduce them in large enough quantities. Eventually someone will figure out the specific molecule needed, and perfect a method to reproduce them in large enough quantities without a power, but not before New Dawn Inc. has a decade long headstart, and a stranglehold on the market that starts," he slapped the machine, "as soon as you make more of these."

Brett could see the look of comprehension dawn on the group of businessmen, but Allec Ruben was already grinning halfway through his presentation. In that moment, he would have bet his degree that the New Dawn Inc. president already decided how things would go long before ever restarting the project. Still, he grabbed Brett's hand in an iron grip, and shook it with all the vigor of someone who'd just listened to the world's best sale's pitch.

"Well Mr. Savvy you've convinced me," then he addressed the man who had been voicing concerns, "What about you Ericson? Still not convinced? You've already seen the failsafe specs. Any other complaints?"

The man who had been questioning the costs gave a very put-upon sigh, eyed the president, Brett, the machine, and the other businessmen with dollar signs in their eyes, then asked, "Can you make it look less like a crab? Something more palatable to buyers, more like a robot perhaps?"

Brett blinked, "...Sure."

"In that case consider your team employed indefinitely," said Allec.

"Here's hoping this project is a success Mr. Savvy," he leaned in and winked, "Because it'll be funding your next one. I look forward to your results on the mutavus cure. Mr. Slick? I'll let you handle the details on this one. I'd like it all to go smoothly."

Mr. Slick nodded.

Twenty minutes later, Allec Ruben and his entourage had moved on, and Brett was sitting in the lab again as his team cheered at the good news. Dr. Mason particularly was all smiles.

"That was quite the pitch Brett, and you said you didn't like talking business."

"Just gotta speak their language Dr. Mason."

The team all chuckled at that.

"Well, this is another step Brett. We're getting closer to mutavus everyday."

"It seems that way. Now we just gotta figure out how the mark two got its hands on a brain. Did anyone manage to pull the data from it while I was giving them the pitch?"

"Er, good news and bad news there," replied Grentle. "Once we found the right query label it let us pull the data it transferred to the brain. The problem is it's... nothing. Just a large empty box filled with scraps of junk data."

"Damn. Maybe the backups?"

"I already checked," answered Sally, "The backups don't even have the junk data, just an empty section of memory. Whatever the prototype was hiding never hit our records."

"If I had to make a guess," hazarded Janice, "The behavior the mark two has been exhibiting is just junk data from the original prototype. It likely doesn't know why it's trying to hide that chunk of memory, only that the original had it labeled as a priority. That's why it didn't try to hide the puzzle test capabilities from us."

"Right right, the mark two's algorithms wouldn't have overwritten that particular behavior yet because its had so much success with everything else it inherited from the prototype. Damn, so we still don't know what set off this advancement."

"Will that be a hindrance to advancing the project?" asked the voice of Mr. Slick. Half the team startled in surprise, having nearly forgotten the suited man in their midst.

"It's concerning Mr. Slick, since it might happen again, and we don't know what effect it will have going forward. Has there been any progress with retrieving the prototype?"

"Unfortunately, passivity hasn't paid off this time as I might have hoped. The local authorities haven't had much success acquiring the prototype, and it seems surprisingly adept at evading the local heroes."

"How is that possible?" asked Grentle.

"See for yourself."

Mr. Slick pulled his phone from his pocket (which he really shouldn't have had with him in the lab), tapped it a few times, then showed it to the scientists, who gathered around. It showed a clip of the arrest of a masked individual by someone with a purple forcefield? And a large rock man? The audio was blanked out, but you could see them having some kind of discussion with the cowl or whoever it was,

before the villain known as Warhead interrupted. The clip stopped there to the confusion of most the team, but not Brett and Dr. Mason.

"What was that?" asked Grentle in confusion.

"Why, that's your prototype," replied Mr. Slick. "This footage was acquired only a few hours ago. I've been keeping tabs where possible."

"What are you talking about? That was just some supers."

"The one in the black Grentle," said Brett. "Remember the Trebla footage I showed you? The suits match."

"It can't be."

"That's impossible."

"They were speaking to it!"

"The movements look completely different..."

"But it does look similar."

"I don't see any injuries this time. How can we prove it without..."

"There's no possible way-"

"Its advancing too quickly!"

"Please calm yourselves," said Mr. Slick, cutting through the exclamations like an icicle. "Mr. Savvy. In your estimation, does this project need the prototype to continue?"

Brett stared at the little phone in silence for a moment.

"I... think we could continue without it Mr. Slick, but... I also think it would be prudent to find out what is going on."

"In that, we are in agreement Mr. Savvy," said Mr. Slick, while putting away his phone. "I'll begin pushing forward on retrieving the prototype. From the look of things, it's had quite enough fun."

A note from Gogglesbear

It's called carcinisation Brett.

Definitely gonna start labeling these, makes it a lot easier to find stuff. Plus punny titles are fun.

Ch50 Spilt Milk

"But I wasn't finished. Ruby said it was all I could eat."

"AHAHAHAHA."

"I don't see what is so funny Pebbles."

"Aha, aha... Tofu, you're the first person I've ever seen get cut off from the *buffet* and not the *bar*. They're set up to serve big hungry mutants like me, and you still made them flinch!" Pebbles started laughing again. I wasn't sure how my being denied food was funny. I'd even offered to pay a second time, but apparently that wasn't enough.

"Well, I'm going to go then." Mikey had wisely left ages ago, and Zaps and Buzzer had both wandered off somewhere in the Cyborg Panda, and Ruby had needed to get back to work greeting guests.

"Oh stop pouting and sit. Didn't I have a free lesson on social crap to teach you?"

"Are you sure you are sober enough for that right now?"

"Oh shush, I've barely had like twelve. Man you get snippy when you're hungry," he took a sip of beer, "Now then. Here's everything you ever needed to know about social interaction. You ready for this? Got your pen and paper?"

"I won't forget Pebbles."

"Good, cause all that crap they taught you, all the stuff you've pieced together since you crawled outta that hole, all the weird shit people do, it all boils down to one, thing..."

"...Which is?"

"Respect." He took another sip of beer.

"I don't understand. I thought respect was merely one of many factors."

"And all those factors boil down to respect. Here, pick any social event you've ever had, and I'll explain how it boils down to respect."

"Alright. Frankie from the Espada. Even after Sanguine basically abandoned him during our rescue of Jasper, he still went back to the Espada afterwards. I never understood why he did."

"Pfft, that's an easy one. Dipshit like Frankie can't get respect anywhere *but* the Espada. No one respects a loudmouth small-time purist a-hole who has to wave his power around like a baby-rattle to get attention. Let me guess, he tried to stab you with it the first time you met him right?"

"Yes."

"HA! Knew it. That's also why Sanguine abandoned him, you know. Didn't respect him enough to care.... come to think about it, I haven't heard much about either of them lately. Sanguine's pretty subtle, but Frankie can't keep his mouth closed to save his life. Maybe someone finally got pissed off enough to off him."

"Most likely. Alright, what about how Nicole can fight really well against rats and other animals, but can't fight against people?"

"She respects the sanctity of human life. If she accidentally injured someone she'd be infringing on their health and wellbeing, and she respects them too much to do that.

"What's sanctity?"

"Respect for something that a higher power says is worth respecting."

"A higher power? Like Hellion?"

"Pfft, ahaha!" he nearly choked on his beer, "Yeah sure, but don't let her hear that. Her head's big enough as it is."

"Hmm... so, when Mikey's grandma said to bring food when you are visiting someone's house, that is also respect."

"Oh definitely."

"What about ribbing? When you and Buzzer and Zaps insult each other."

"Simple, we respect each other enough to know that it's all in jest."

"...What about when people who are mutants don't wear their armbands?"

That caused him to pause for a second.

"...Because they think you aren't respecting their humanity. Y'see Tofu, we people are social creatures. When the first group of cavemen fended off a sabertooth tiger for the first time, it wasn't because they were stronger, or had weapons or what have you. It was because they all stood together, screaming with their fists raised, and the tiger turned and ran. Ever since, we've relied on each other, and that's why respect is important."

"Because if you don't have it, you get ousted from the group, like Frankie."

He nodded, "Yes, and no one wants to be ousted from the group that is humanity."

"...I understand... how do I get respect Pebbles?"

"Pfft, don't you even worry about that. You've earned it several times over since you put on that mask, not least of which when you dived into a vampire filled sewer to rescue Buzzer with me. You're one of us Tofu, no doubts about it."

"Oh, that's good... I think I'm going to start heading home Pebbles. I have a lot to think about. Thanks for teaching me."

"Ha! No problem, I am a font of wisdom after all! Don't forget to tip the nice lady."

"Okay. Thank you for dancing for us ma'am." I handed a fifty dollar bill to the woman who had been dancing on our table since they cut me off from the buffet.

"Aw, thank you hun. Any time."

I left the Cyborg Panda and took a bus home, since Mikey took the van back hours ago. Pebble's concept of respect was... difficult to process, but it seemed correct. Everything humans did was in some way, shape, or form connected to their society, and their place in that society was determined at least partly by respect. The way Pebbles phrased it implied that it was a straight-forward affair, but I was already making correlations to previous concepts I'd come across. Take kayfabe for instance. Wrestling matches seemed like a simple fight if you knew nothing about them, but if you watched one you would quickly come to realise that it is much more a performance than a straight-up fight. Because of this, they could designate large auditoriums, sell tickets, attract an audience much larger than the one who would only be interested in a straight fight, and even create careers and jobs and expand the human social system. All because everyone respected the *lie* of it. Without that, the entire system might collapse, and then no one would benefit. Neither the audience or the performers.

This went deeper than I had previously imagined. I would need to go back and start correlating previous events to the concept of respect... but maybe in the morning.

I made it home without incident, stored my new souvenirs, watered my plant, made a sandwich, and then sent a few final messages to Nicole and Tim before crawling under my bed. It had been a long day.

I woke up early, as normal, feeling mentally refreshed. Today I didn't have anything special planned, so after I went to Adder's morning training, and filed my report with Sandra for the latest incident, I was going to maybe do some cooking and let Nicole test it for me. Apparently my sense of taste was off in comparison to most humans, which made it difficult for me to judge whether or not my creations were a success.

I filled out one of the spare reports, then headed for the door. Outside in the hallway though, I ran into a neighbor. It was the woman with brown scales, Natasha, as well as her two sons. She had them each by a hand, and seemed to be in some distress.

"Hello Natasha, Ollie, Lucas," I nodded to the three of them. I'd become somewhat acquainted with them over the past weeks, since they lived on the same floor as me, and Natasha seemed friendly with Cindy.

"Tofu! Hello. Hey, do you happen to know where Cindy is today? She didn't answer her door."

"I'm sorry, I don't. She might be at morning training already. Would you like me to send her a message?"

"I already did, but she didn't answer. I was going to ask if she could babysit for me, my normal sitter canceled... hey, do you think, you could maybe watch them for a while? If you aren't busy?"

"Um..."

"I'm really sorry to ask, I just have a really important interview I need

to get to."

"Interview? Don't you already have a job with-"

"Ah! Um," she directed her eyes at her two kids, before leaning in to whisper, "they don't know about *the business*."

"Ah."

"I'm just, trying to find a new job that's a bit... safer, y'know? It shouldn't take more than an hour or two, it's just at seven so I need to get going. Please? I just need someone to keep an eye on them in case they try to burn the place down."

"Um, I suppose I can..."

"Thank you! Seriously, thank you so much! Here's my key, you can just sit on the couch and watch t.v, they're always tired in the morning anyways. And my fridge is stocked, feel free to make yourself breakfast. Again, thank you so, *so* much! I'll be back soon."

She eventually kissed her two sons goodbye (to their chagrin), and waved at them as she left on the elevator. I'd gone along with it since she'd said I could have breakfast, but strangely I was suddenly unsure of myself. Natasha obviously loved her sons, and now I needed to make sure they stayed safe. I hadn't had much interaction with children, although I'd talked a bit with Cindy about her babysitting. From her description, it didn't seem too hard?

I turned to Ollie and Lucas. They stared up at me, apparently waiting for me to make the first move.

"...Want to watch some t.v?"

They both shook their heads, no.

"...Breakfast?"

"We ate already," said Ollie.

"...already," mirrored Lucas.

"Do you play Gribblin Tamer?"

"We don't have phones," said Ollie.

"...phones," mirrored Lucas.

"Ah..."

"..." "..."

"...Want to see my knife collection?"

Nicole

Nicole woke up, feeling like something was off. At first, she thought it might be because she was sleeping cushioned by a bed. But after a bit of thinking, that wasn't it. Then she thought it might be the embarrassment of having run into the sewer yesterday, and she was somewhat still embarrassed about it, but that wasn't quite it either. She felt different. Physically. It took her a little while to realize what it was.

She wasn't hungry.

She blinked a bit. *That can't be right. I'm not even close to full size yet.*

But as she checked herself over, it seemed to be true. Her regeneration had been working overtime since she'd been injured, and she'd been eating Rattleback's protein bars like they were popcorn. All of her essential limbs were back now. Head, claws, and *all* of her legs, it was just, smaller than before. Right now she wouldn't fit on a regular sized elevator, but one of HH's plus size ones?... Well, maybe. If she contorted herself, and used every inch of space?... maybe.

Definitely not gonna test that just yet.

She blushed. Her coworkers had already teased her for panicking during the drill, and if they knew she could fit on the emergency elevators anyways? That would be just too embarrassing.

She flexed her limbs, and everything felt natural enough. Her legs felt just as limber as before, her claws were heavy and shield-like, but not the vault doors they had been before, and her vision was back to normal.

Pfft, normal.

But it was kinda true. Until her second head and eyes grew back, she had felt like she was half blind, and had constantly kept trying to unconsciously open eyes that weren't there. Perhaps she'd taken that vision for granted a bit. But, now everything was back to normal it seemed.

Nicole smiled. *And today I get to use the fabricator again!*

She got up and readied herself for work. Right now she was still using the room Tofu had dumped her in days ago, and she only had a few odds and ends she'd made herself using the fabricator, things like a hand mirror, that were small and easily carried away. But, if she wasn't growing anymore, maybe she'd be able to keep this room?

Best to not get carried away though. It might have just slowed, not stopped. No sense getting my hopes up.

Still, she was humming a tune as she left her room, walking backwards. She'd gotten into the habit since everyone had met her real face first... and perhaps because there had been a few accidents when she went around a corner the normal way.

"Hey there Nicole, you're up early."

Nicole looked over to one of the tables in the common room, where Spikes was sprawled out, having slept in her seat from the looks of it.

"Good morning Spikes. I just thought I'd get a head start on the fabricator while no one's using it. I want to try a new circuit board design I saw in the book I'm reading."

"Ugh, it's too early in the morning for that kind of thing dear. Never could wrap my head around all that techno babble stuff."

Spikes leaned back and stretched, working out the kinks from sleeping in the chair. Ever since Nicole had come to the villain base, Spikes had taken it upon herself to introduce Nicole around the place and get her settled in, and Nicole had learned a lot about her and the others who worked as minions. For example, Spikes was actually married to Dillo, and both of them were actually *sixty* years old! You'd never guess it, because Spikes had the body of an athletic thirty-year-old, a result of the high regeneration rate her mutation required to produce her spikes. They actually had a son, Hedge, who was older than Nicole! It seemed henching had become a family business with them, and Spikes seemed determined to teach Nicole all the tricks of the trade, despite some of them being... less than legal. Still, Spikes was like a combination of hippy, ride-or-die biker, and doting grandma all rolled into one, which made it strangely endearing even when she was explaining the finer points of kicking heroes in the balls and running for it.

"I'm just excited I guess. Socket said he was going to teach me how to put together a short-wave scrambler."

"Well, you have fun with that dear. Want a piece of nutrient bar? I managed to sneak one off of Rattleback."

"No thank you. I'm actually not hungry! I think my regeneration is finished!"

"Oh that's wonderful! Glad to hear it. Swivel girl, let me get a good look at you."

"Um, I should get going actually," said Nicole, suddenly overtaken by a bout of shyness, "Don't want to have to wait when Davy tries to load a whole wafer tray into the fabricator."

"Well alright, but if you don't learn to show off the goods how are you gonna impress the boys?"

"*Goingbyenow!*"

Spikes chuckled as Nicole scuttled out of the room before Spikes could tease her further. Spikes had been helping her get used to being around other people again, but she wasn't quite comfortable enough in her own skin just yet to... even joke about such things. But still, progress. She had friends now, and a roof over her head, and an interesting job that she very much wanted to be the first one to this morning. Before someone else hogged her newest love in life; the Parcel Corp Deluxe MkIII Fabricator.

It's going to be a good day.

Ifrit

It's going to be one of those days.

"GET THOSE LEGS UP YOU MAGGOTS!"

Warhead (or Uncle Bert as Cindy knew him) had made a surprise showing at the early training session, and had decided that Adder's stretches weren't enough of a warm-up for the unlucky people he'd caught there. Utterly unfair is what it was. This was supposed to be her zen time, where she put herself together for the day, not a forced march!

Because of course Uncle Bert wakes up for morning practice. Thank god I didn't have breakfast yet.

She was forced to run twenty laps as fast as she could around the large auditorium, and could only thank her lucky stars that she wasn't one of the people who couldn't even finish. Those people received such a loud ear full from Warhead that Adder actually stepped in to mercifully save them. Something told Cindy that the training room would probably be rather scarce for the next few days, and maybe the base in general as well.

"Bah, if they don't know how to run they shouldn't have signed up," grumbled Warhead, as he walked up to Cindy. "Hey there squirt. Glad to see you've been keeping up with it at least. Sorry about all the yellin' but I can't be playing favorites you know?"

Cindy sighed, "No worries Uncle Bert, I get it. But you know we want to actually *keep* some of our employees, they aren't forced to be here."

"Bah, if they want to be paper pushers that's one thing, but if these mooks think they can wear a bonehead mask and not know how to run, they'd better get used to taking their licks. Where is everyone anyways? Don't tell me we've only got the fifteen of these losers," he thumbed over his shoulder at the gasping group.

"We have over a hundred Uncle Bert. This isn't the only training session of the day, and it's not like everyone comes in all at once, or

everyday."

"Tch, things have been growing slack while I was gone. I'll have to whip these maggots into shape before I go back south."

"You aren't staying?"

"Ah, I'll probably get nicked again at some point. Or they'll come begging me to go smash bugs one way or another. You know how it is."

"Uh, not really."

"Anyways Cin- er, what were you going by anyways?"

"Ifrit."

"Ifrit?... The hell's an Ifrit?"

"A type of demon in ancient Islamic mythology. It's similar to a jinn, and has several different spellings depending on where you, um..."

Warhead was looking at her blankly, his face having gone slack.

"...It's a fire spirit Uncle Bert."

"Huh, always knew you'd be a smart one. Anyways, mind showing me where Socket is holed up? Need him to fix my helmet; got all scuffed up because of that stupid vampire."

Cindy led Warhead to the garage, where it was unlikely that Socket would be up already, but maybe someone else would be there to help. They rounded the corner, and instantly Cindy spotted Nicole, who was over in her favorite corner of the garage.

"Hey, Nic-"

"**BUG! Cindy get back!**" Warhead suddenly grabbed Cindy's shoulder and threw her back.

"W-what?! NO! Uncle Bert stop!" she grabbed his arm, and almost had her arm wrenched from its socket as Warhead accelerated forward, smashing into a steel table that went carreening at Nicole. Nicole screamed and lifted a claw to block the heavy object, but when it hit, it was with enough force that her clawed arm **cracked** in three places, not yet big enough or strong enough to take the hit. Luckily, it was deflected enough that it didn't smash into the rest of her, and instead went on to smash into one of the machines against the wall next to her.

"WARHEAD, STOP!" yelled Cindy, desperately running forward to catch him before he could further hurt her friend in a misunderstanding. Luckily he didn't make another move, nervously looking between a shivering Nicole (who he now realized was not *just* a bug) and at Cindy, who was yelling for him to stop.

"I... shit, I..."

"*Bert!* This is Nicole, my friend! She *works here!*"

"Shit. I'm, I'm sorry... shit, reflexes. I didn't mean..."

Cindy grabbed his arm, not sure whether she was going to yell at him or hit him, but when she did, she realized that he was trembling. He wrenched his arm free, then took a deep breath and faced Nicole.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize. Army reflexes. You alright?"

Nicole tried to say something, but she didn't seem able to get words out.

"...Sorry. Cindy, can you... I'll talk to Socket later. Need a damned drink." He turned and left in a hurry, which was probably for the best, but which left Cindy to clean up the mess he'd made. She turned to Nicole, who was nursing her bleeding claw. Cindy's eyes went wide at the extent of the injury, and she rushed up to Nicole.

"I'm so, so, **so** sorry about him. He didn't mean anything by it, I promise. Are you... we should get that looked at."

"...s'fine. It'll be fine," said Nicole. "It'll heal, I just... I'm going to go have breakfast. I'm hungry."

"I'll come with you."

"That's okay. I think... I'd like to be alone for a while."

Cindy watched as Nicole trudged away, heading for Rattleback's office instead of the cafeteria, which she would have needed to follow Warhead's path to get to.

Shit.

Just one of those days.

Conclusion by Zinc Doge

Natasha came home to her apartment to find it in ruins: deep gashes and holes in the couch, the chairs, the walls.... the table was laying on the floor legless, somehow. Tofu was sitting on the chair and her boys were on the couch. All three of them were staring straight ahead, wordlessly. A full minute passed, and it seemed like the social baton of initiating conversation was passed to her.

"Tofu.... what happened here?"

"Hello Natasha. Your children wanted to see my knife collection, so I showed them."

".... you did all this? Why?"

"They asked why I had so many knives, and I explained that it was necessary. They did not believe me when I said I can use all of them at the same time, their exact words being 'nuh uh' and 'show us' I believe."

Her kids took this as their cue to put their two cents in: "He was so cool." "... so cool."

This was NOT what Natasha was expecting when getting a babysitter. But as they say, sometimes you don't get what you want.

"Tofu.... this..", Natasha struggled and failed with keeping her voice and emotions calm, "THIS IS GREAT!!!"

"I got the job at Neo Target. I'm quitting my other gig, and my kids are now your kids. Congratulations, you're a dad now. I'm outta this joint." Natasha turned around and left to join another webnovel with less weirdos in it, hopefully.

Tofu blinked at the awkward moment. None of his simulations were prepared for this outcome, and decided to break the ice by getting the important stuff out of the way with his new sons as early as possible. He looked at the kids.

"I eat people for a living, you know."

The oldest looked at him and muttered "We do, too." ".... too."

The End.

Ch51 Comfort Food

Sidekicks

Morph took a deep breath, and knocked on the door in front of him... no answer. After a few seconds, he knocked again, but there was still no response, or even any noise. That meant Turbo was likely still asleep.

He fidgeted in indecision, his arms twitching as if he didn't know how to hold them while thinking. On one hand, waking up a tired hero, even one as... abrasive as Turbo, felt rude to Morph. On the other hand, it was already nine-thirty, and their shift had technically started at eight.

Eventually, it came down to the choice of which hero Morph wanted to deal with. Yeah Turbo would probably be belligerent and perhaps cuss out Morph for waking him, but somehow that wasn't as intimidating as a possible lecture from Brick about asserting himself. Brick never yelled at Morph or Poena, nor did he get irrationally angry, but being lectured by him was like listening to an army drill sergeant trying to keep their cool while speaking to unruly high school students. No mean words were spoken, but the disappointment and mounting frustration were palpable. Maybe it was all in Morph's head, but still, talking to Brick was intimidating.

So, hoping he wouldn't have to go ask Brick what to do next, Morph knocked on the door to Turbo's quarters once again. And one more time. And again, but a lot louder than he intended, because his power picked up on his frustration and turned his knuckles to stone just before he knocked. He got through two complete, rumbling taps before-

"What?! What is it?! The hell are you making all this noise for?" said Turbo, leaning on the suddenly open door frame and rubbing his blurry eyes. He'd put on a blank mask to answer the door (basically just an extended domino mask with the Fortress City emblem), but was otherwise just in sleep shorts; Morph had to stop himself short from knocking on the man's bare chest. The man was lanky, with pale skin, and *in shape*. All evidence of how often he ran around in his full-body costume. The only other defining feature was the man's short, dark hair, which had a bleached-blond stripe running down the middle from front to back, somewhat reminiscent of the road mark design of his costume. A bit tacky looking, in Morph's opinion, but Turbo pulled it off well enough. The women Turbo often brought to his room seemed to think so, at least.

Morph gathered himself. "Well, I'm assigned to you for today's patrol, um, sir."

"No you ain't," grunted Turbo, still picking sleep gunk out of his eyes. "It's my day off. Poena's with Brick, and you're with Magenta."

"Er, Magenta is in the hospital, sir."

Turbo paused, his brain catching up to the waking world. He gave Morph the stink-eye.

"Magenta. In the hospital."

"Yessir. They say she might be out for a week or more, so we're taking her patrol area."

"Christ. What'd she do this time?"

"Er, there was some sort of vampire monster thing..."

"God damn it. Always with the fuckin' bugs." Turbo lifted the blank mask a bit so he could pinch the bridge of his nose. After a few moments went by (where it became clear Morph wouldn't just walk away and stop bothering him), Turbo said, "Fine. Fuck it. I was running up and down the *entire* sector yesterday by my fucking self, but whatever. Let's do another damn shift. Musta been crazy when I signed up for this job." He turned back to his room to get ready, and said over his shoulder, "Meet me in the garage. Don't make me wait," before slamming the door, leaving Morph alone in the hall.

Morph awkwardly started jogging to the garage, his legs growing slightly longer and lengthening his stride as his power picked up on his urge for haste. Coming from anyone else, Turbo's comment might have been hypocritical, but there was every possibility that the speedster would be waiting in the garage for him when he arrived, and Turbo *hated* waiting. Morph, Poena, and a Central support agent had driven around with Turbo all day yesterday, and Turbo had constantly been impatiently jumping from the moving vehicle to respond to incoming reports (often leaving the door swinging open on his way out). Technically, they were supposed to follow along and learn from Turbo how he handled these situations and maybe provide support if it was safe to do so, but there simply hadn't been time. Not with Brick and Magenta assisting with the lockdown, leaving Turbo as the only active hero for the *entire* E13 sector. It ended up with Morph and Poena awkwardly riding around in the van all day, only helping with taking statements or other non-violent, handler-approved tasks. It resulted in a lot of griping from Turbo, who muttered about Central "babying" them while he did all the work. Morph... unfortunately had to agree.

The sidekick's injuries during the Trebla robbery had spooked Morph's and Poena's Central-assigned handlers, and the two sidekicks had been assigned nothing but basic duties after being healed by a super with a medical-focused power. On the one hand, Morph was extremely glad they weren't just throwing him in the deep end during

the middle of Odd Summer. On the other hand, Morph could practically feel the pressure weighing down on everyone around him. Cops and Central agents were overworked, emergency resources were strained, and heroes were needed everywhere. The sudden lockdown in E12 had unleashed a flood of small incidents, from minor crooks taking advantage of the confusion, to normal civilians panicking due to the fear of whatever unknown disaster was happening right next door. Right now, things were holding together, but only because Turbo had been nearly everywhere at once, and E13's more notorious villains had declined to cause trouble during the, admittedly short, lockdown. But now it was the next day, and E13 was down another hero, leaving only Turbo and Brick in the middle of Odd Summer.

Morph could count. Hellion, Imp, Socket, Warhead; already the list outnumbered the capes two-to-one, and he'd barely even started. That wasn't including the massive list of notable minions Hellion had in her employ, nor any of the other members of Hellion's old crew that might be tempted to stop by now that Warhead was around. Even worse, it wasn't like there weren't other cowls in E13 besides Hellion's Henchmen who might cause trouble. Mechanilizer, Snarl, the Vega family; people forgot about them with Hellion's Henchmen always center stage.

Morph sighed as he reached the garage and Turbo was indeed leaning on the hood of an escort van, tapping his foot and grumbling under his breath. Seeing Morph, Turbo zoomed into the van, taking shotgun, and yelled out the window for Morph to hurry up. Morph got into the back seat, and the Central agent who would be driving got them moving, pointedly and professionally ignoring the stream of invective slowly filtering out under Turbo's breath.

Yep, one irate hero and his inexperienced sidekick were all that stood between E13's southside and the dozens of crooks and cowls that might decide today was the day they put their plans in motion.

Who knew what they might be up to?

Tofu

"Why is all of your stuff on the floor?" asked Ollie.

"I have it organized for efficiency. That way I can reach everything easily."

"Even the knives?"

"Especially the knives. They're the most important utensils."

"That's weird," mumbled Lucas.

"...Is it?"

"Yeah," agreed Ollie.

Admittedly, I hadn't gotten around to properly furnishing my apartment yet, but I'd been to both Mikey's house and Nicole's room at the HH base, which had led me to believe that the floor of one's own personal space was a perfectly acceptable place to store items. Maybe it was weird because I organized everything by dimensions, use, and estimate of need? Perhaps disorganization was a requirement.

"What are those things?" asked Ollie.

"Metal slugs. I made them."

"And those?"

"I.D. cards."

"And those?"

"Teeth."

"Those are too big to be teeth."

"Not for a will-o-wisp."

"...What is **that**?" asked Lucas, uncharacteristically loud. He was pointing towards my window.

"That's my plant."

"**COOL!**" shouted Ollie, rushing over to the potted plant with Lucas in tow. They stopped short, to my relief. The plant had continued to remain immobile and benign, as advertised, but I didn't know how it might react to children. I didn't want them getting hurt if they somehow managed to provoke a volatile reaction.

"How'd you get a plant?! Are you rich? Is that why you have so much weird stuff? What do you feed it? What's its name? We saw plants at the zoo, but they were plastic. Wait, is this one plastic? Can I touch it?"

"Which question do you want me to answer first?"

"Uhhh... what's its name?"

"I haven't named it."

"You have to name pets!"

Ollie and Lucas set about determining what the best name for the plant should be, which apparently involved trying to yell their suggestions the loudest. Meanwhile, my phone rang, and I answered a call from Cindy.

"Hello Cindy."

"Hey Tofu... so um, I've got a little problem you might be able to help me with."

"What is it?"

"Well, there was an incident at work, and long story short, I'm gonna need help cheering up Nicole."

"Was it Tedic?"

"What? No. Actually it was Warhead. We were heading to the garage and I freakin' *forgot* to tell him about Nicole. I should have realized. He's been fighting ants down in South America since forever, and just sort of reacted when he saw her. Accidentally broke her claw before I could stop him. He apologized, and Nicole said she's fine, but well..."

"I see."

"I don't suppose you might have any ideas? I feel really bad about it."

"I could cook her some meatloaf?"

"Er, I don't really think that's going to cut it, Tofu. She seemed really down."

"I'll think about it then, but you should also call Mikey. He will likely have better ideas than me."

"Alright. Also, I got a text from Natasha saying she needed my help sitting the twins. If you're still at the apartments, can you let her know I'm going to take a while? She's not answering her phone."

"Oh, I talked to her already. I'm watching Ollie and Lucas right now."

"...You are? Is everything going okay?"

"Yes. I'm showing them my knife collection right now."

"Hey Tofu?" asked Ollie, interrupting, "Is it okay if we pet your plant?"

"Are the scales on your hands puncture-proof?"

"I dunno~."

"Then only touch the dull parts."

"Kay."

"Tofu?! Was that Ollie? Tofu, what's going on over there?" asked Cindy.

"Just making sure the plant doesn't injure them. Some of the larger leaves can poke." An indicator popped up on my phone. "Oh, and I'm getting another call from Mikey; that's convenient timing. I'll ask him about cheering up Nicole and get back to you. Talk to you later."

"Tofu wai-"

beep

"Hello Mikey."

"Hey Tofu."

"Is everything fine? You don't normally call so early."

"Hey, I get up early sometimes. Anyways, I was just calling to warn you to make sure you do the after-action paperwork for last night. Sandra seemed kinda pissed when I drove the van back alone, so maybe make sure you have it filled out before you see her."

"I have my report ready, but thank you for the warning."

"No worries. How about you, everything go fine after I left?"

"Nothing dangerous happened at the club, however, would you happen to know the best way to cheer someone up? It seems there was an altercation at work this morning, and Nicole was injured."

"What?! She okay?"

"Her claw was injured, and Cindy says she seems depressed over the incident."

"Damn, she just can't seem to catch a break."

"The best way to cheer someone up is candy!" yelled Ollie, suddenly. He'd been listening in.

"...Hugs," supplied Lucas.

The two of them began listing suggestions to cheer people up, the naming of the plant apparently forgotten. It seems children are easily distracted.

"Uh, where are you, Tofu? I'm hearing a lot of yelling in the background."

"That's Ollie and Lucas. I'm watching them for my neighbor."

"...You're babysitting?"

"Yes."

"And everything's going fine?"

"It seems to be. I've talked to Cindy about it. She normally sits for them."

"Oh, that's good then..."

"Take her to the zoo!" interrupted Ollie.

"The museum!" said Lucas. They'd continued yelling suggestions throughout the phone call.

"Well anyways, we'll put our heads together and think of something for Nicole," continued Mikey, not having heard what the kids were saying. "I'm not on shift today, but maybe I'll stop by and we can see how things go. Maybe we can all figure out something fun to do together. Could definitely do with something relaxing after all the stuff with the lockdown that went down yesterday."

"Indeed."

We ended the call, and I turned back to the twins who were now arguing over whether the zoo or museum was better.

"Tofu! Tell Lucas the zoo is better!" demanded Ollie.

"Nuh uh. The museum is better," asserted Lucas.

"Which one is better, Tofu?!"

They looked at me expectantly. I did a quick search on my phone for what those things were, and it was clear:

"I think the zoo is better."

"HA! SEE?! I told you so!" yelled Ollie.

Lucas frowned. Then, his lower lip quivered, and his eyes became watery. With a hiccup, he slowly started to wail, a shrill sound that emanated from him at an impressive volume.

"Are you injured?" I asked, worried. I'd just told Mikey they were fine.

Lucas didn't respond, continuing to cry. Ollie himself was wide eyed, and became more and more anxious as Lucas continued to cry. He kept glancing between me and Lucas, as if expecting me to do something, but I was unsure what was the correct response for crying children. Ollie's own eyes soon grew watery as well, and it seemed he might start crying too, but then he threw his arms around Lucas and yelled, "I'M SORRY!"

They both then cried for a little while, but eventually settled into sniffles and hiccups. Still, they did not at all seem happy about the situation, likely to break into a bout of crying again at any moment.

Fascinating behavior.

I had observed babies cry to alert their parents to physical distress, but I was certain that Lucas hadn't been physically harmed, so it must have been the answer I gave. It was surprising that merely saying something could produce such a completely distraught reaction, and indeed, a hug from Ollie helped to make Lucas feel better, like Lucas said they would. This was by far the most extreme emotional reaction I'd seen to words so far, and yet Ollie was able to calm Lucas rather quickly. Learning how to provoke and alleviate such reactions on demand would be highly beneficial, and with such clear-cut

reactions, it seemed children could be a useful tool in testing human emotional stimuli.

"Lucas, might I ask what it was I said that made you sad?"

"Y-you said the museum w-was bad."

"Ah, then there has been a misunderstanding. I did not mean to say that the museum was bad, just that of the two options I believe the zoo to be better. Both options are good, but after carefully considering the pros and cons, the zoo is slightly more valuable to me. Another person might find the museum more valuable, and I will indeed present both options to Nicole, as I believe both options would be of interest to her. I apologize for not clarifying."

"Okay..."

Lucas continued sniffling though, and Ollie continued to hold Lucas's hand while looking at the floor and frowning, obviously still feeling bad about his part in making Lucas cry. Despite both Ollie's and my own apology, and hugs, it seemed Lucas was still feeling sad.

Hm. How to solve this without having to resort to hugs, myself? What else made children happy?...

"Do you two like sugar?"

Morph

"You have the right to your mask, and to the identity it represents. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can, and will, be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided-"

"Newbie, we don't have time for the whole song and dance," interrupted Turbo. "Just cuff 'em to an anchor and leave 'em for the cops to handle."

Morph blinked at Turbo, who had suddenly appeared next to him in a blur. Morph's arms were currently made of concrete and wrapped like snakes around three would-be thieves he'd just caught. They'd cut through the metal shutters of a closed pawn shop window using some kind of metal absorption power one of the three had, before grabbing as many electronic items as possible and running for it. Morph cornered them after they ran down a dead-end alley and, despite the metal absorber having slightly enhanced strength, had been able to apprehend them without any injuries, or Turbo's intervention. Technically, his first solo collar.

"Er, right," replied Morph. He reached for the cuffs on his belt, but then paused as he realized a potential problem.

"Um, Turbo? That guy absorbs metal, and the cuffs are metal, so... how do I..."

"Ugh. Then we *wait*," replied Turbo, managing to make 'wait' sound like a curse.

Morph put cuffs on the two men who couldn't absorb metal, and they settled in to wait for a pick up. Luckily they were in an alley, so at least there weren't any rubber-neckers, but having to stand around

holding on to a criminal while Turbo paced was awkward to say the least. They never showed this part in the movies, at least, none that Morph ever watched.

Five minutes passed, then Turbo raised a hand to his com, receiving a new communication from Central. He listened a few seconds before responding.

"...Negative dispatch. Can't intercept. Currently running overwatch on sidekick, Morph; we have powered perps awaiting pickup."

"Um, I think I can hold them here if you need to go?" offered Morph.

"And have Brick rip me a new one for leaving you here unsupervised? Pass."

Three minutes went by before the next call came in for Turbo, which he again refused. Then five minutes before another came in. Finally, when a fourth call came in and was passed by, Morph nervously spoke up.

"Um, Turbo, I can just, not tell Brick? If you need to go? That was a lot of calls. I'm sure I'll be fine."

Turbo just tilted his head back and let out a long, exasperated sigh.

"Your helmet has a camera right?"

Morph blinked, "Oh. Yeah."

"Then it looks like I'm stuck here. Word of advice: ditch that shit the

moment they let you. Causes nothing but trouble."

"Oh... I guess Brick checks that, doesn't he?"

"Not what I meant, but sure."

"...Not what you meant?"

Turbo rolled his eyes, but said, "We aren't stuck here because Brick has a pole up his ass. He does, but that's besides the point. We're stuck here because this asshole," he pointed at the man quietly sitting in Morph's clutches, "can't be secured. Next time make sure that doesn't happen."

"Alright... how do I do that?"

"Jesus, this isn't rocket science. Next time, when you're doing you're best round-up rodeo impression, just hit him harder. He can't run away if he can't run."

"Oh... isn't that kinda..."

"Tch, it's a super fight, kid. Put them down before they put you down. You think Brick doesn't tenderize guys like these on a daily basis?"

"I guess. But Magenta-"

"Crushed a dude in half on camera. Like I said: ditch them. As if anyone even gave a shit anyways. You know all that outrage was just Hellion's people astroturfing, right?"

"But what about-"

"Look! Stop asking stupid questions, and trust the guy with the highest arrests-per-minute ratio within three sectors. Ditch the cameras. Beat up the bad guys. Get paid. It's that simple."

Turbo refused to say more, and they waited in silence until the cops

finally came to take in the three men Morph apprehended (bringing with them a specialized containment unit complete with plastic cuffs), whereupon Turbo immediately ran off to deal with the calls still in progress. Morph got back in the escort van to slowly follow Turbo with the Central agent, pondering the discussion with Turbo all the while.

He supposed it made sense. Beating someone black and blue didn't seem like something you should do as a member of law enforcement, but when the guy you were trying to arrest could deadlift a truck, there were only so many ways you could apprehend them. Morph supposed that was why the training he'd been given put so much emphasis on avoiding use of excessive force *after* the arrest, but was conspicuously absent of reminders for proper conduct *during* the arrest. Logical sense. Still...

He pulled out the work phone he was issued when he became a sidekick. Sidekicks didn't have access to the full hero network, but the police network arrest records were open to him. After all, sidekicks needed to learn how their mentors did things, right? And what better way than to research the cases they'd worked on?

Morph pulled up Turbo's records. The man hadn't been lying; Turbo's power allowed him to go through incidents at a rate most heroes could only dream of, and the records reflected it. It gave Morph an excellent sample size, even after he filtered out the arrests of normal citizens. That left him with the list of supers and mutants Turbo arrested, and the results made Morph frown. While the normal citizen arrests were largely inconspicuous, the super and mutant arrests were spattered with injury reports. Especially the mutant arrests. But was it enough to be concerned? Pulling up Brick's and Magenta's records showed a similar ratio of injuries among arrests, maybe even a tad higher than Turbo's... but you didn't call in a speedster for situations that required a straight up fight. You called them in where their speed could potentially end a fight before it started. From their

power sets, one would assume Turbo's arrests would have a lower injury ratio than his teammates, but that wasn't the case. Add that to the fact Turbo had far more arrests total than Brick and Magenta combined and it meant that while the ratio of arrests-to-injuries was similar for all three, Turbo had far more injuries logged total. Nearly one to two serious injuries for every five arrests of a super or mutant.

Should... he tell someone? Brick, maybe?... But maybe he was way off base and those numbers were normal. He was just a fresh sidekick after all. It wasn't like someone else wouldn't have noticed, right? Causing discord over a rookie's misunderstanding would be a terrible idea, especially during Odd Summer while the team was so strained.

Hell, even if Turbo was using excessive force during arrests, was that necessarily bad? Could you blame him for being heavy-handed on criminals when the sector was, quite literally in some cases, on fire? If Morph had been just a bit rougher during the fight, they might have been able to secure them at the scene and head to the calls that came in. Calls where people needed help. Hindsight was twenty-twenty, he guessed...

But Morph knew that wasn't *really* what Turbo meant.

Tofu

"Tofu, you're gonna miss it! This is the best part!"

"That's alright. I still need to finish the second batch of waffles."

As it turns out, the twins did indeed like sugar. We moved back to their house so I could make us something sweet to eat, and it turned out that Natasha owned an antique waffle iron. I'd been wanting to try one out, so I decided to make waffles (with syrup in every square, as the twins instructed). The twins happily ate their syrup and waffles while watching a television show called 'Ted the Tinker', in which a tinker was currently exploring 'space' in his tinkered school bus while teaching a class of young humans.

It was **absolutely terrifying**. Of all the things I had learned since escaping the lab, space was the absolute worst thing ever. The exact nature of the world outside the lab was far more sinister than I ever imagined, and I was in awe at the mental integrity with which the twins watched the cartoon. The show informed us that to travel between 'planets', you had to cross a massive void with absolutely nothing in it, for billions and trillions of miles in all directions. No materials, no resources, no nutrients, and if you somehow found yourself adrift in space without a method of propulsion, no amount of resource conservation would allow you to hibernate long enough to survive the millions and billions and trillions of years it might take you to drift towards a suitable planet. Assuming you drifted to a suitable planet, and didn't just smack into a sun, or get sucked into a black hole, or cooked by a solar flare, or any number of other terrible things that were completely unavoidable if you found yourself drifting in a vacuum. Wandergheist could be avoided, gods could be appeased, powerful supers could be killed, and Mikey's grandmother's ghost wouldn't actually kill you. But space? Inexorable death.

"Tofu, you're missing Saturn!"

Ugh.

I suppressed the illogical urge to scrub my memories of the information, and resolved to package the knowledge from Ted the Tinker into storage as soon as the show was over. Knowledge of space was too important to delete, but I didn't want the information actively in my higher processes.

For the next hour, I watched television and ate waffles with the twins, who alternated between staring at the television, eating, and rapidly rushing around the room while pretending to be superheroes that punched asteroids. It seemed that sugar agreed with them, as they seemed much more energetic and happy now. The physical and mental benefits of sugar couldn't be denied, which made it strange that many humans seemed to abstain from consuming adequate amounts. At least the twins had no such qualms, eating everything I gave them. Yet still, I might need to give them a little more, as they were wasting a lot of energy with unnecessary movements, flailing their arms and dashing about as they were.

> 18 years growth until legal recognition as a 'functional adult'.
>
> Average estimate of Odd Summer events before adulthood: 5.
>
> Estimated probability of death before threshold reached: high.
>
> Conclusion: Inefficient design.

It was no wonder humans were so protective of their young. The growth period of the human 'lifecycle' was absurdly long, and human children seemed to have no real defenses against predation. With the amount of dangerous scenarios experienced during daily Fortress City life, it seemed like a miracle that humans ever reached adulthood... though I suppose that was the reason parents provided for their

young for the majority of this period. I doubted Ollie and Luke would be very successful minions, even with their fixation on the 'capes and cowls' practice they seemed to enjoy.

Until then, they were a great source of information, both as living examples of human children, and due to the fact that they tended to 'blurt' out information on whatever caught their fancy. Already I had several new items to add to my list of topics that required more in-depth research, especially this 'zoo'. According to the twins' description, it was where you could go to "see all the animals," which sounded like a perfect place to collect more designs. The advertisement online promised, "exotic animals from pre-Odd Summer times," which sounded like a wonderful opportunity to collect baseline designs.

My list of research topics just keeps getting longer... Maybe that's why humans took so long to grow? From the samples I'd collected so far, their brains seemed to finish congealing around the twenty-five to twenty-nine year age range. Perhaps that's how long it took for them to learn everything they might need to operate as fully functional humans? I was definitely having trouble keeping up with the abundance of topics I encountered on a day to day basis, even with constantly searching the internet on my phone.

It was just so difficult to tell what I should be focusing on. Combat data and physical improvements were of course top priority, followed by things I needed for day-to-day survival and maintaining my disguise, but then things got tricky. How important was it to know Spanish, or Mandarin, when English was the dominant language in Fortress City by far? Which pop-culture references were essential for me to know? Was memorizing Jesus's powerset important if he was currently (but apparently only temporarily) dead? What about knowing the average price of whole grain wheat? Could I use the fibonacci sequence to enhance combat predictions? Which was a more efficient use of my time; memorizing the numbers in an E13

phonebook, or figuring out how to synthesize a kobe beef substitute using a mix of bologna, human liver, and cheese whiz? All of these research topics and more had a place on my list, but it was difficult to decide which to focus on without a proper frame of reference.

Sigh. Hopefully the schools wouldn't take too long to reopen after Odd Summer ended. Maybe Sandra could find me a spot somewhere? Until then, I suppose I could focus on-

Click clack

"I'm home~" called Natasha, opening the front door.

"Mom!"

"Mom!"

The twins went running for their mother, games forgotten, and immediately began blurting out a summary of everything we'd been doing.

"Tofu made waffles!"

"...he has a bunch of stuff on the floor."

"And we watched neptune!"

"...u-ti-sils, and tooths, and metal bugs..."

"And we played capes and cowls!"

"...has a plant!"

"And he has a plant!"

"Oh my, seems you two had quite the exciting morning, but I bet it wasn't as exciting as mine," she paused for effect, "I got the job! When Odd Summer ends I'll have a job at Babs' Beautifiq Boutique! No more long nights for me. I'll be able to tuck you two in every, single, night." She pinched their cheeks.

The twins' reaction was... likely not what Natasha was hoping for. Their faces went blank, then showed confusion, then became distressed, before Ollie asked, "Does that mean... you won't be a superhero anymore?"

Natasha blinked. "What?"

"Ollie shhhhhh!" said Lucas, trying to shush Ollie.

"What's this about?" asked Natasha, again.

The twins looked at each other, then awkwardly faced their mother.

"We found your hero mask," admitted Ollie.

"Hero mask?"

"...The white one," said Lucas.

"Oh! That mask."

"Please don't stop being a superhero!" begged Ollie.

"Ah! Ollie, hunny, that mask, um, that's not a superhero mask."

Both twins gasped.

"You're a supervillain?!"

"No! No Ollie, that mask, it, um-"

"Your mother doesn't wear that mask, Ollie, Lucas," I interrupted. All three of them turned to me. "She got it from our warehouse job. There was an entire shipment of them that wasn't paid for, so we got to keep them." I pulled out my own mask. "See? Even I got one. Working in a warehouse is quite lucrative. I get to add lots of things to my collection."

It took a little more cajoling, but eventually we convinced the twins that their mother and I really did just work in a warehouse. They then became pouty afterwards because their mother wasn't actually a superhero, but she just pulled them into a hug while mouthing 'thank you' to me over their shoulders.

"You could still sign up to be a hero," pouted Ollie, to which Natasha laughed.

"Sorry hun, but even if they took mutants, I think I'm better suited for a desk job."

I agreed. Her mutation was simply not as durable as most of the other powered minions, and if her priority was funneling earned resources into her offspring instead of herself, then a job with a safer risk/return was preferable. Being even a rank-and-file minion carried some physical risk, and being a bonehead could be quite dangerous if you didn't have the correct power set. Frankly, I wasn't sure why anyone would risk it without the ability to heal themselves or prevent injury; humans could be far too fragile. Those that then chose to be super villains and made themselves a target? Well, I had enough

evidence to prove they were definitely crazy. The only thing more dangerous was being a superhero.

I couldn't begin to imagine what went through their minds.

Sidekicks

"Stay here."

Poena couldn't believe her ears.

"What!? I can help!"

"You aren't trained for this yet. Maintain a perimeter until the firefighters get here."

"But-"

"Stay here!"

Brick didn't waste another word, and marched right into the burning apartment building, flames licking uselessly at his sides. Poena stood where she was for a moment, fuming, before moving to do what Brick told her to. It incensed her that once again she was being relegated to busywork, but she would follow orders and get it done perfectly. Just like everything else she was assigned. Maybe then she would finally get to do something meaningful.

She got to work, what little of it there was. The residents of the apartment building were already evacuated safely by the time she and Brick arrived at the scene, a combination of good architectural planning and the fire drill practice that most everyone in E13 had down pat (this was Hellion's stomping ground after all). Two of the evacuees did need to be looked at for minor smoke inhalation, but the central agent that was *babysitting* Poena was already handling it. Instead, all she had to do was keep idiots and looky-loos away from the building, which left her plenty of time to stew over her situation.

Ever since the bank heist in E12, Poena was constantly being assigned the most menial of tasks, stuff that any Central agent would be able to do. It was like everyone had forgotten Poena was trained for this! She'd signed up the very day she triggered her power (before Odd Summer was officially announced), and attended more than just Central's training courses (which were woefully incomplete in Poena's opinion). Police protocol? Memorized. Emergency procedures? Drilled. First aid? Self-defense? Pfft. She'd taken courses in first aid well before she'd ever gotten her power, and attended a self-defense class since she was thirteen. Her fencing club? That was just exercise. One of many activities she excelled at.

Even if it had been her favorite.

Her demeanor soured further at the intrusive thought. *Had* been her favorite. The final match of the tournament where she gained her power had been her last match. Likely forever. They didn't allow you to compete in sports after you gained a power, nothing official anyway. Too many ways for someone to cheat even if their power technically didn't apply to the situation. That meant she was banned from any meaningful fencing tournament, an outcome that burned all the more as the win had gone to her opponent from another sector. The smug asshole scored the first hit and then-

"AAAAAHH!"

The sound of shattering glass preceded a scream, and Poena's head whipped around to the source. She caught just a glimpse of a body falling through the air before it impacted the pavement with a wet thud. The person had crashed out of a second story window of the burning apartment.

Poena was running to the body before most of the crowd could even gasp in shock, a can of multipurpose flame retardant pulled from her utility belt. Upon reaching the body, she liberally sprayed down the areas that were still aflame, then coated any patches of exposed skin she could see. Poena doubted the burn-ointment properties of the spray would be up to the task though. The man was practically charcoal.

Poena checked his pulse, found nothing, then risked turning him over in order to begin CPR. She flinched at the sight of his burned face, and was suddenly very grateful for the tinker-made can of compressed air attached to her utility belt, as well as her helmet which blocked out most of the smell of... burnt meat.

She unfolded the plastic respirator mask attached to the can and placed it over the man's mouth and nose. It automatically adjusted a bit, before a green diode lit up letting her know she could proceed. She pumped air into his lungs with the can, and then compressed the man's chest, then repeated. And repeated. And repeated. It felt like an hour, but couldn't have been more than a minute before the man suddenly lurched, pulling in a strained breath of air on his own. Relief filled Poena. She'd practiced CPR many times, but never had to implement it in a real life-and-death situation before.

With the man breathing again, Poena took a moment to recheck her surroundings. Reflexes had kicked in when she saw the man fall out of the building, but now she was wondering what exactly happened. Why was the man trapped in the building when everyone else had already evacuated? Was he related to the fire? Fortress City buildings didn't burn easily on their own. Was he a dumb criminal that got caught in his own arson attempt? Not likely. Brick hadn't appeared, which meant he was likely still dealing with whatever caused-

The burned man suddenly grabbed her arm, and Poena nearly activated her power in surprise. She tried to tug her arm away, but his hand stubbornly clung to her, surprisingly strong. He gasped terribly, trying to say something.

"Stop moving. You've been badly injured."

It didn't seem like he could hear her, and she worried that he would hurt himself further if he didn't stop struggling. Where were the damn ambulances?

"Sir. Sir, can you hear me? You need to stop moving, you might-"

The skin on the arm that gripped her sloughed off, and Poena nearly screamed, but she strangled her reaction into a gasp instead. Where she expected grisly bloody bits and bone, instead was only smooth skin with an oily orange sheen. Healthy skin, that she could see was still settling into place like hardening cement.

Mutation. He was mutating.

Poena paled beneath her mask, and felt the bile rise up in her throat, but she forced herself to remember her training and follow it. She'd known this was a possibility, and there were steps to follow in just this situation.

Her free hand fumbled at her belt, her fingers feeling like jelly inside her gloves, but after a few tense moments managed to pull an emergency ration bar from its pouch. Hurriedly ripping the wrapper, she removed the respirator and held the bar up to the man's mouth, trying to tell the man to eat as she did so... and this time she did scream as his head whipped forward to snap at the nutrition bar, nearly taking her fingers with it. She flinched back as far as she could with his hand still gripping her arm like an iron manacle, and watched as a mouth now filled with razor-sharp teeth made short work of the bar.

Over the next few minutes, Poena pulled more bars from her pouch and fed them to the man, not even bothering to remove the wrapper. Disgustingly, some of the razor sharp teeth fell out even as he chewed and were swiftly replaced with flat teeth better suited to chewing the energy bars. It continued that way, the mutation making swift changes while he ate.

Just as she began to worry that she would run out of food, the new mutant finally stopped eating, and his head fell back as he drifted into unconsciousness, no longer able to push past the pain and trauma of his ordeal.

Poena ripped her arm away from the mutant's now limp hand and stood up, retreating a dozen steps to get to a safer distance. Sirens announced the arrival of the fire department, and a flash of anger

crossed her thoughts. What the hell had taken them so long? Poena didn't wait for them, and instead marched for the escort van, ignoring the cowardly central agent that still wasn't approaching the mutant, ignoring the civilians that gawked with their cell phones out, and entered the van, slamming the door behind her.

Poena sat and removed her helmet, then concentrated on slow, deep breaths.

I will not throw up.

She'd done her job perfectly. Unlike the agent.

I will not throw up.

Followed all of Brick's instructions. Dull as they were.

I will not throw up.

The crowd was safe, and the muta-

I will not thr- **ulp.** *I will not thro-*

She materialized a green needle, and stabbed it into her palm. The ghostly item pierced right through, doing no damage to her hand but

igniting her pain receptors as if it had, causing the muscles to involuntarily spasm. Poena focused on that pain, distracting herself until her stomach settled. When it finally did, the needle winked out as if it never existed, leaving her hand without even a mark.

She didn't throw up. She'd handled the job and contained the mutation.

Perfectly.

Nicole

Sewers in Fortress City were pretty nice, as far as sewers went. Lots of room to move around in. Relatively clean, at least in comparison to other mega cities. Plenty of monstrous fauna to eat if you were peckish, and lots of places to hide if you were one of those said fauna...

...Okay, so it was both metaphorically and literally a shit hole. But that made it a perfect place to mope.

__squee__

"Yes yes, Mr. Chonkers. Here."

Nicole broke off another piece of her nutrient bar and tossed it in the water. The large nessie snapped it up before it even had time to soak, and made distressing gurgling noises as it swallowed the dry snack. Nicole would have been concerned if this hadn't been the upteenth time this had happened. Mr. Chonkers wasn't exactly a patient animal, finishing the hard swallow and then immediately nuzzling up to Nicole for more. While he was a couple tools short of a belt, Mr. Chonkers definitely knew how to be affectionate when he wanted food. Both he and the other nessies were one of the many bright spots in Nicole's life as of late.

So I really shouldn't be moping... or should I? I don't exactly have a balanced frame of reference.

She'd been through a lot over the last few years. Most of it shitty, a fair portion of it terrifying, far too much of it life-threatening. Perhaps she could have avoided most of it, but only by allowing the powers that be to shut her away in an asylum where they wouldn't have to look at her.

"Compared to all that, what's a little cracked chitin? Right, Mr. Chonkers?"

Mr. Chonkers squeaked in mindless agreement, before suddenly turning to the entrance tunnel. The tendrils surrounding his mouth wriggled before he dunked his head just below the water and started blowing angry bubbles. Nicole knew what that meant.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, a familiar figure entered the nessie nest chamber. Tofu, wearing his normal everyday clothes, juxtaposed

by his creepy doll helmet. He really seemed to like that thing. In his hand he had a plastic bag filled with containers, which she guessed to be whatever food was Tofu's newest obsession. Walking over, he gave Mr. Chonkers a light bonk when the nessie lunged at him, before sitting down next to her.

"Hello Nicole. Did you get my text? I brought waffles for you to try."

"Thank you. And yes, I did. Did you see my reply?"

"I must have missed it."

"Uh-huh..."

Nicole rolled her eyes as Tofu pulled the containers of food out of the bag. Tofu miss a text? *Sure*. She'd sent him a reply saying she wasn't hungry and he needn't go out of his way, but as expected he'd gone dead silent afterwards. Obliviousness? More like weaponized obtuseness. Tofu was nothing if not stubborn when it came to food, treating the concept of 'not hungry' like it was a particularly strange and intriguing alien to be studied.

"Make sure you pour syrup in every square," he cautioned, setting up the insulated containers.

"Alright?"

The waffles were amazing. Made from scratch and kept fresh with tinkerware containers, they were a far cry from the waffles in her memories. She'd only ever had the frozen kind, and those years ago, before she mutated. She ate with relish, and felt a bit guilty for claiming not to be hungry and then destroying nearly a dozen waffles.

"These were really good, Tofu."

"Thank you. I tried to copy the recipe from Maggie's Sunrise Diner. I think they came out well. The twins Iiked them too."

"The twins?"

"I was babysitting my neighbor's twin children this morning."

"Babysitting?... Did that go okay?"

"No worries. Neither child was injured, and I reported the singular crying incident to their mother."

"Oh. Good. That's good..."

"How about you? I heard you were injured at work?"

"Ah, yeah, there was a bit of an accident. It's not bad though, see?"

She maneuvered her claw around so he could get a clear look. It really wasn't as bad as it could have been. Just some large stress fractures near the 'elbow' from blocking the table. Rattleback had helped put some antiseptic putty on to seal the injury but, truthfully it probably wasn't necessary. The cracks scabbed up well even without the putty, and she could still support her claw, even if it was sore and she couldn't move it too fast.

"How did this happen?"

"Oh, it was nothing. Just spooked a guy into having war flashbacks. You know me, always going around scaring people."

"Nicole, you would not intentionally scare someone. Are you okay?"

"What, I, yeah I'm fine Tofu. It was just an accident. It'll heal fast."

"That's good. But I mean how are you feeling emotionally?"

"I, I'm fine, Tofu. Really. It was just a mistake, he already apologized and everything."

"It is my experience that mistakes can hurt feelings even if you explain and apologize. Did the waffles make you feel any better?"

"They did, Tofu. Really, I'm fine. Everything's glimmer bolts. Honest."

"..."

"..."

"...Would you like a hug?"

That got a small snort and smile out of her.

"Tofu, you hate hugs."

"Yes, but hugs seem to help people who are feeling sad."

She paused, then sighed while giving her ponytail a tug.

"...I mean, if you're offering."

It was a shame Tofu didn't like hugs. He was really good at them. Creepy doll mask or not.

"Better?" asked Tofu.

" A lot better. Thank you."

"Good. Now then, I wanted to ask-"

"WARHEAD! YOU SCHEME-SLAGGING SONOFABITCH! I'LL KILL YOU!"

The roar echoed down the sewer tunnels, drowning out Tofu and silencing the nessies. Even the water seemed to drip more quietly, afterwards.

"I guess Socket found out about the fabricator," squeaked Nicole.

"Indeed. I'm surprised we could hear him from this distance. Isn't the base insulated to prevent echoes?"

"Yep."

"Hmm. You know, I find I'm still hungry. Would you care to go hunting?"

Another crash echoed down the tunnels, sounding suspiciously like a wrench impacting cement.

"...Somewhere far from the base?" Tofu clarified.

"Sounds like a plan." A great plan, even! The best. They packed up the tinkerware and made ready to leave.

"Also," said Tofu, as they walked away. "I wanted to ask, do you prefer museums, or zoos?"

For some reason, a shiver went down her spine.

Ch52 Mystery Meat Machine

Nicole and I made it back to base after a short hunt in the sewers. We weren't very successful, likely because the nessies had claimed the area in a several mile radius and scraped the walls clean. Still, walking and talking seemed to cheer Nicole up, enough so that she wasn't completely adverse to what Mikey and Cindy had in store.

We were going on an outing.

"I don't know about this guys."

"It'll be fine, Nicole. We won't go anywhere you aren't comfortable with," replied Cindy. I could tell she was quite confident in her plan, as she'd already changed her voice using her inhaler in preparation.

"Still, wasn't there that lockdown? Wouldn't it be safer to stay in for a while?"

"I think we'll be fine," said Mikey. "The super vampire is dead, and Tofu handled the smaller ones fine."

"Oh, I'd heard about that from... Wait, *you were there*?"

"Yeah, we were in E12 for a job yesterday and got caught up in it. Didn't you tell her, Tofu? While you were out, uh, hunting?" he said, turning to me.

"He didn't!" said Nicole, giving me an exasperated look. "We talked about waffle irons and brunch history the entire time."

I shrugged, to which everyone rolled their eyes.

"Anyways," continued Cindy, "That's exactly why now is the perfect time to go out if we don't want to run into a lot of people. No one's going to want to be out after sundown when there was a lockdown caused by vampires."

"I guess... okay, let's do it."

"Woo!" whooped Mikey, pumping his hand in the air. "Finally get to use my license for something that isn't a getaway."

We headed for the garage, where Cindy and Mikey had reserved a large van ahead of time. It took a bit of finagling, but Nicole managed to fit into the rear compartment. It was a good thing we were doing this now, as Nicole probably wouldn't fit with another few days of growth. If I couldn't shift my own organs around, it might have been very uncomfortable sitting beside her.

"Are you sure you're alright sitting like that, Tofu?" asked Nicole. "You look a bit, uh, cramped."

"I'm fine, Nicole."

"So, where are we headed anyways?" asked Mikey. "Did you hash anything out with Tofu?"

"Oh, I'm okay with anywhere... uh, except the zoo. Sorry, Tofu, I'd rather not go there."

"The zoo?" questioned Mikey. He and Cindy both turned questioning looks towards me.

"Lucas recommended it."

"Tofu, Lucas is a little kid," said Cindy. "Of course he'd want to go to the zoo."

"But, I made sure to research it online. See? It even has baseline animals from before the first Odd Summer." I held up my phone with the website advertisement displayed.

"Dude, trust me. Even for E13 that zoo is a complete junk pile," said Mikey. "The animatronics barely worked even back when I was a kid, and I doubt they've fixed them up since."

"Animatronics?"

"Uh, like the robots and stuff?"

"Robots?"

"...Tofu, they don't have real animals at the zoo. It's all machines and holograms and stuff that are supposed to look like the animals."

"But the website said..."

"It's just advertising, dude. They do that to get the, ahem, kids excited."

"Oh..."

The internet ***lied*** to me.

__cough__ "Well, how about we just get on the road and decide from there?" Mikey said, as he started the van.

"Maybe you can go there later, Tofu?" offered Nicole.

"That's okay, there isn't any value in observing fake animals."

"Aw, it's not that bad. There are better zoos in other sectors if you really want to see them."

"There are? With animals? Would you want to go to one of those instead?"

"Er, no, no real animals. Even if there were, I'm afraid my time at Tartarus kinda soured me on the concept of animals in cages."

"They sent you to Tartarus!?" interjected Cindy.

"What's Tartarus?" I asked.

"It's a detention center where they lock up category four mutants. I can't believe they'd send you there, Nicole!"

"It was the only place I could go to get the resources I needed after my mutation. I didn't really have anywhere else to go," Nicole shrugged. Then she frowned. "Although, they definitely didn't seem too keen on letting me leave. I checked myself out after one of the, uh, permanent residents caused a commotion."

"Those assholes," spat Cindy.

Tarturus added to priority list.

I might need to pay a visit there later. It definitely sounded interesting. More than the fake robot zoo at least.

Mikey drove the van towards the garage exit ramp while Cindy and Nicole discussed alternate places to go. But, before we could leave, a figure in a mask I didn't recognize came out of the stairwell and ran towards us, waving their arms frantically and nearly tripping over several pieces of equipment.

"Oh no," muttered Cindy. "Um, hold up for a sec, Mikey. That's Murphy, one of mo-, er, Hellion's acquaintances. We should see what she has to say."

Mikey halted the van, and Murphy nearly collapsed as she reached the side window. She was a thin human in a tracksuit, and she wore a strange white mask that mimicked a person's face. It was inscribed with mathematical formulas. To my surprise, I was able to recognize and understand all of the represented math. Normally, when I looked at higher level mathematics there was always an included formula or two that threw a logic error. Not this time.

"Wait," *__gasp__* "Cindy, you-" *__gasp__*__cough__* "-slow down... fuck, my head."

"Deep breaths, Murphy, we'll wait. Is something bad going to happen? I haven't seen you in months," said Cindy.

"Not how it works," gasped Murphy. Slowly, her fitful breathing subsided, although it seemed her head was troubling her quite a bit. She kept moving her mask to clutch at her temple.

"Woo, thought I wasn't going to be able to catch you," said Murphy. She pulled her mask properly into place, and stood up straight. "Now then, my name is Murphy, owner and operator of the Red Dragon Casino and subsidiaries. And you must be Cindy's friends? Mention her for a two- no, *five* percent discount on your first chip exchange over ten K... Sooo, you all were headed out somewhere?"

"Oh no. Is something bad really going to happen?" asked Cindy.

"Nice to see you too," responded Murphy, flicking Cindy's forehead. "And no. I was doing some work for Hellion yesterday and was in the area, so I thought I'd offer my services to any interested parties."

"Oh. Thanks, I guess, but doesn't that usually cost a lot?" asked Cindy, rubbing her forehead with a slight frown.

"Usually... but this one's a cheapo."

"Um, excuse me, but what exactly are we talking about?" asked Mikey.

"Murphy can sense and control luck," answered Cindy.

"Oh please, Cindy, you make it sound so banal. We're talking about the karmic scales, the grand roulette, the universal math, happenstance and divine providence, and if you want, I can be your guide down the path to the biggest payout," responded Murphy, sweeping her arms in grand gestures and ending with a pose. I wondered if she and Trebla knew each other.

"You pay money for luck, Murphy," Cindy deadpanned.

"You used to run around my casino in your underwear."

"HEY! No I- I was only two years old!" said Cindy, her ears turning red as she threw glances at us.

"Annnyways. Theatrics aside, I noticed you all heading out to cause teenage trouble *right* after the next sector over had a small vampire apocalypse and thought, 'hey, why not make sure Cindy's mom doesn't have a heart attack'. Real cheap too, a bargain barrel price."

Cindy narrowed her eyes at Murphy. "Okay... and how much would that be?"

"Say, oh I dunno, about ten K."

"What!?"

"Per person."

"Oh, come on! We were just gonna get some food and go to a drive-through movie or something! Was it going to go that badly?"

"How would I know? I don't see the future, Cindy, but I do see odds, and a van full of people of interest to law enforcement tends to stack them against you. Heck, this guy here still has his minion helmet on," she said, pointing at me.

"I was going to take it off..."

Murphy tilted her head at Cindy.

"Ugh, fine! We'll pay it."

"Cindy, I don't have that kind of money," said Nicole.

"I'll cover you guys, don't worry."

"What?! I can't ask you for that!"

"I'm with Nicole, that's way too much," replied Mikey.

"How about one hundred thousand per person, Murphy?" I asked.

The conversation abruptly halted, and everyone turned their heads to me.

"What? It stands to reason that if we can buy luck, we should buy as much as possible. I can cover it."

"Oh-ho, it seems we have a big spender here," said Murphy, rubbing her hands together.

"A hundred thousand..." muttered Mikey.

"Tofu, you can't!" protested Nicole.

"Tofu, how do you even have that much money?" asked Cindy.

"Hazard pay. And Hellion had a bounty on the rat-stitcher. I've been stockpiling what I earn."

"Tofu, that's way too much just for this," said Nicole, while pulling on her ponytail.

"Is it? Like Murphy said, most of us are wanted by the authorities, and they will likely be on alert after the lockdown. If using money can guarantee a safe outing, then it seems worthwhile."

"But four hundred thousand?!"

"Alright, alright everyone, quiet down, you're aggravating my headache," said Murphy. She tapped her finger against the lips of her mask. "I can see that money is an issue, so how about a little trade instead. I've got a little job that requires a professional touch, and you happen to be professionally employed. How about you help me out, and it'll be worth the price of making sure your little joyride goes well. Deal?"

We exchanged glances before Cindy turned back to Murphy.

"Saying it is... what do you want us to do?"

The first thing Murphy wanted us to do was drive her to a pharmacy to pick up more pain relief medicine for her headache. The second thing? Well, it seemed we *would* be going to the museum today.

"You want us to rob a museum?" asked Nicole, incredulously.

"Not rob. Burglarize," clarified Murphy.

"That's hardly better!"

"What's it matter? You're a minion. It's just some light theft."

"I'm a mechanic! I wasn't hired for this!"

"You work for HH, I'm sure some of it has rubbed off on you. You'll be finnne. It'll be like riding a bicycle."

Nicole glared, and waved a hand at her legs. All two dozen of them.

__cough__ "Right. Well regardless, without you the odds of this going off without a hitch drop dramatically. Sure you want to let your friends go without you?"

"Murphy! Don't guilt trip her! " said Cindy. "Nicole didn't sign up for minion work. If she doesn't feel comfortable, she doesn't have to go."

"...I'll go."

"Nicole, you really don't have to. We can handle this."

"It's fine. I just need to turn off the alarms, right? I've got one of Socket's kits, so it should be simple enough..."

"That's the spirit," said Murphy, "and don't forget your mask." She held out a black domino mask to Nicole.

"You're joking."

"Them's the rules."

"Ugh. Fine."

Nicole snatched the mask from Murphy, then began the careful task of extricating herself from the van. With Murphy riding along it had been a very tight fit. Myself, I started unloading the rest of Nicole's 'disguise' from the supplies we'd brought with us. Nicole's hesitance about this endeavor was understandable, as she had been mistaken for a category four mutation multiple times in the past, and humans tended to respond unpredictably when confronted with the more drastic mutations. An encounter with law enforcement, or worse, private citizens with illegal firearms, could go badly. To that end, I'd procured some additional deterrent to avoid mix-ups.

Namely, twenty-eight armbands for Nicole to wear. Four for her arms and claws, and twenty-four for each of her legs.

"I feel ridiculous."

"I think it looks fine, but more importantly it is safer. No one will be able to claim ignorance in the event of an altercation this way. Have you thought of a code name?"

"I think I'll be fine as Nicole."

"Hey, that means you can join the real-name club with me and Tofu," joked Mikey. He extended his fist for a bump, to which Nicole gave a half-hearted smirk and returned the fist bump. Then Mikey turned to Cindy. "Speaking of which, did you want us to call you Ifrit, or did you have something else since you're wearing a domino mask?"

"What?"

"Uh, well did you want us to use your real name too or... Oh! Shit! Were you trying to keep that under wraps? I thought Tofu and Nicole already knew, uh..."

Cindy shook her head. "No no, they already knew. I wasn't really trying to hide it. It's just, good policy to try and keep work and home life separate, y'know?"

Mikey let out a sigh of relief. "I get that. So..."

"Eh, I guess for today I'm joining the real name club," Cindy said, with a grin.

"Right on."

"Hey! Loyal minions!" called Murphy from the van. "Get a move on, nighttime's burning!"

Cindy rolled her eyes, but all of us finished up grabbing our equipment for tonight and started heading across the parking lot to the museum.

"Anyone else feel like maybe we were bamboozled?" said Mikey.

"Yeah, that's definitely a possibility," said Cindy with a sigh, "but Murphy... she tends to see important things. She once called my mom to tell her to throw a box of donuts out the window. It turned out the donuts had been laced with C4 by an HH competitor, and then they landed on Kandor who happened to be patrolling outside. The heroes wound up going after that guy over the incident. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if her entire offer was all a ruse to get us out here."

"Oof, office life in the supervillain sector, am I right?"

"Right..."

"Anyways, I think that's the administration building over there?" Mikey pointed across the parking lot, and we headed towards the building.

E13's museum was a series of three buildings that differed in architectural style from the surroundings, seeming to favor stark white rather than the base gray colors of cement. There was the main display hall, the small administration hub, and an intake hub which was out of sight behind the display halls when looked at from the front. The display hall took up most of the allotted space, with large, forward facing windows, and thick columns holding up an overhang. There were advertisement posters for the displays inside hanging from the columns, and one such poster was hung up in front of a window that had been boarded shut due to damage. There was also a lot of litter in the surrounding parking lot. And a lot of potholes, and cracks on the building itself where more decorative embellishments had been damaged and never repaired. There was a lone statue on the roof which appeared to depict a winged mutant looking out into the parking lot, the others having been removed or destroyed. It gave off a very neglected feel. But, it seemed some artists had tried to liven the place up a bit by covering the reachable areas in symbols and depictions, one of which was a notably large and embellished HH tag. 'Graffiti' was a common decoration in all areas of E13, and I found

that I quite liked it. Gang tags were useful in denoting which factions frequented an area, and the varied colors and patterns tended to act as a sort of pseudo-camouflage, helping the profiles of passerby to not stand out so starkly against gray concrete.

We made our way around to the administration building, which was more like an offshoot of the main gallery which linked it to the intake hub. It hadn't been made with the same aesthetic in mind, being squat and concrete gray. The windows were high up the sides and too small for a human to enter, even not factoring in the bars. The lights were off, and the building seemed empty. Nicole approached the door with some trepidation, clutching the bag of tools to her chest and looking back and forth across the parking lot. Several times she glanced straight up at the sky and quickly turned away again. I sympathized. The sky was unpleasant to look at. So much empty space was unnerving.

"Woo, haven't been out in a while," muttered Nicole. Upon reaching the door, she pulled open her pack. "So I just, open it? Anything I should know?"

"It might have a silent alarm," replied Cindy. "We'll keep watch, so take your time."

Nicole pulled various tools from the bag, fiddling with and double checking each before taking a deep breath and getting to work. She used only two of the tools before the door lock clicked, surprising her.

"It's already open? And I think I got the silent alarm? That seemed too easy," said Nicole.

"If you got the silent then that's probably it. E13's museum is... yeah. I think people stopped robbing it decades ago. They don't even accept

cash for admission, they only take chits and cards now."

"That explains the lack of guards," I mentioned. The small parking lot had been completely empty, and the grounds looked deserted.

"No point in guards if the only thing they'll do is get hurt. We just need to wipe the cameras."

We all headed into the offices, Nicole being especially careful not to bump her legs into desks and trash bins. We walked through the front area which held a few desks, stacks of paper, a few desktop computers which Nicole declared to be 'ancient', and a lone wireless security camera with its red light blinking. Nicole pulled a device from her pack and used it to trace where the camera was sending its footage. We followed the signal into the back area.

The back area wasn't any more interesting, composed mainly of filing cabinets and several neglected office desks covered in stacks of forms and old take out boxes. I helped Nicole move a cabinet that was sitting in front of a closet door with power warnings pasted to it. Inside was the fuse box for the building and a few metal boxes with wires leading into the walls. Nicole popped the lids on some of them open, and after fiddling with them a bit declared, "Uh, the recording isn't stored here. It looks like someone jury rigged it to send it through a landline to somewhere else."

"Bleh, it's probably in another building. Make sure your masks are secure in case we can't find it."

"That doesn't really help me!" squeaked Nicole as she nevertheless fussed with her mask to make sure it was secure.

"I'm sure we'll find it, Nicole. They probably just changed it after the, um, last time something like this happened," Cindy finished sheepishly. "We'll check other cameras while we get what Murphy wanted."

We made our way to the intake hub through a corridor that connected them to the offices. The door separating the two buildings wasn't alarmed, though Nicole double-checked it anyway. Inside, the intake hub was composed of several rooms attached to a central hallway, reminding me a bit of a school, or the lab I was made in, except that there was also a large garage attached to the end of the hall. Most of the building looked like it was being used as storage for various displays.

"Alright, first on the list is, 'Anything valuable from tinker Nummum. The lucky number is 347'... Real specific there Murphy. Okay, probably best to see if we can find an inventory somewhere," said Cindy, eyeing the displays and random objects that were piled in the hallway itself. It seemed the museum had a large backlog.

It took a while, but we eventually managed to find the desk where someone did inventory, placed randomly in one of the rooms. It was all in physical paper logs, which took some deciphering before we could understand them. Whoever worked here had some really sloppy handwriting. I managed to speed things up by flipping quickly through the manifests until I detected the number 347.

"Here. It says that some personal effects were part of an intake that was placed in room five, intake three forty seven. It hasn't been sorted yet."

"Good enough place to start as any."

We found the corresponding room, and we went to work looking through the piles of crates for the one labeled with the correct intake number. Most of the crates were in order, but there were some large gaps and mixups in the numbering scheme. The box we were looking for wound up being at the back of the room, behind a large

cardboard cutout of a hero giving a speech. The speech bubble was ripped in half, and Mikey only noticed the box behind it because he was trying to make out the missing words.

"Hah. That was *lucky*," said Mikey. I think it might have been a joke, but it only got an eye roll and smirk from Cindy. Nicole was too nervous to react beyond being interested in the box. Hopefully I could find something to make this outing enjoyable for her. Minions usually bantered and had some fun on small jobs like this.

"Oof, tough crowd. Well, let's see what we got."

The small crate was nailed shut, so I pried the top off carefully. Inside were various objects, some I didn't recognize and some I did.

"Okay, so we have... a pair of fuzzy dice, some very old, used train tickets, a rusty stapler, a broken cold iron, some old picture frames, and... a pair of heavily modified sneakers? Careful!"

"It's fine. Those are just Tinberboks, some new fashion trend," said Nicole. "They're junk... according to what I read online."

"Huh. Was the cold iron Nummum's, maybe?

"No way. It's old, but only like, thirty years old? I've used parts from one with that logo before. Nummum has been dead for... oh gosh, over a hundred years ago?"

"A hundred and fifty three years ago according to his wiki page," I supplied. "But I'll need to double check that later." Couldn't have a repeat of the zoo ad. Those liars.

"Wow, what a bunch of junk then," said Mikey. "Maybe the numbers were a dud?"

"There weren't any other items with the labeling three forty seven," I

answered. "I don't think the rooms or displays go up that high."

"Hmm, must be *something* here..."

Mikey ruffled through the items, pulling out a few more bus tickets. Flipping through the frames revealed a few pictures of heroes with signatures on them. They were old enough that they might be worth something, but not old enough that they were something Nummum could have owned. It was when Mikey picked up one of the shoes that we found what we were looking for. A roll of coins fell out of it.

"It's filled with half-dollars," said Mikey, unwrapping the roll. "That's Nummum right? He made money?"

"Yeah. We can check with Murphy before we leave, but this is definitely what her 'instructions' point to," said Cindy.

"Huh. Seems like a lot of trouble for... twenty-five bucks in change." Mikey shrugged his shoulders and picked a coin out of the roll, holding it up to the light. "Looks normal... oh! It says twenty-one, sixty-two. Look." He passed the coin to Nicole, who suddenly looked quite interested, and pulled another coin out of the roll. "Twenty-one, fifty-seven." He passed it to Cindy and started handing out the coins so we could all look through them. All of the coins were printed using the old A.D. format, as opposed to the current O.S. format.

"Wasn't the timeline format switched to O.S. in the twenty-first century? Not the twenty-second?" I asked. While the internet was suspect, I was pretty sure I would have noticed such a large discrepancy in my research. To my knowledge, the A.D. format ended with 2018, the year of the first Odd Summer.

"It's because of Nummum," said Nicole, excitedly. "I've read up on him a bit. He was a tinker from Ireland who the Architect hired to do all the tamper proofing on the city's money. But rumor has it Nummum hated the new O.S. labeling, and would switch the mint

machines back to A.D. whenever people weren't looking. Because no one could replicate his tamper-proofing, he never got fired for it. They recalled a bunch of them, but he lived a long time, so there were a decent amount floating around out there.

"And this mislabeling makes these coins special?" I asked.

"Yep. Some people collect them, and Nummum's machines have started to break down, so they've gotten pretty valuable. There's fifty coins here, so that could be a few hundred, or even a few thousand dollars or so. I don't know what the individual dates are worth."

Hm. The wiki mentioned a special A.D. print of coins in honor of Nummum after his death, but not the information of Nummum's character or his minting eccentricities. Not technically an inaccuracy, but still a lack of information which could result in inaccuracies. Adder had taught me inaccuracy had its place, but that was during combat, and only to introduce an element of randomness to your attack pattern. Who was the wiki trying to attack? Even stranger to me, the money printed with inaccurate information was worth more than its actual numerical value.

Humans were just, **so** weird sometimes.

"Well, we've found the Nummum stuff Murphy wanted. What's next on the list?" asked Mikey.

"Says to be on the lookout for anything labeled sixty-seven or with the word 'Winter', take anything that looks especially valuable or 'casino themed', leave a taunting note, and to... avoid waffle irons?" replied Cindy.

Everyone looked at me.

"I didn't bring any."

"Uh-huh. Well, then I guess we just finish this up, then. And find the security footage," she added, with a nod to Nicole.

We set about looking through the rest of the storage rooms while Nicole tried to track down the security footage. Crate number 67 was filled with paper mache superhero masks, apparently made by a local elementary school and awaiting display in the gallery. My friends unanimously decided to leave those where they were. Apparently taking them would have been 'mean'.

As for 'Winter', we found several different references and objects. One was a small piece of costume for a hero named Long Winter. Supposedly it was all that was left of him after he was vaporized. Another was a book, "Odd Summer and the Long Winter: a Mathematical Explanation for the Nine Year Gap," First Edition by Ectos.

Its pages were filled with skittering numbers, letters, and patterns that made me feel... sick? It was like, like, ekil a so... 13711676f7f2z6e6n7f2z6t7n2z612z7f7t7f6t6B2z676F2z7f6F2z6n736f6B616

Error.

Error.

Error.

"Close it! Close it!" cried Mikey, repeatedly.

"I've got it, I've got it!" cried Cindy, slamming the book shut. She was holding the book, which was weird, because I had been holding it.

"TOFU! Tofu, are you okay!?" Nicole was grabbing me by the shoulders and trying to look into my mask.

"I'm fine? I... did something happen?"

"Tofu, it looked like you were having a seizure! Your arm melted!"

"Oh." She was right. My left arm was mush and leaking out of my suit, and there were multiple points of failure across my entire body. Signal interruption; the micro units self-destructed. One such point was in my brain, so I had indeed been having the equivalent of a stroke. I began repairing the damage, Nicole hovering over me and asking questions to confirm my mental state. Cindy and Mikey looked like they had also had some difficulty, as Mikey was retching into a trashcan, and Cindy was holding the closed book at arms length and leaning unsteadily on a nearby crate.

"Cindy, can you please burn that book?" I requested.

"With pleasure. I can't believe someone just left this thing lying around. Let's take it outside, it'll set off the fire alarms." Cindy's phone rang. She glanced at the number. "It's Murphy. One sec."

When she answered her phone, the sound of Murphy yelling not to destroy the book came through loudly.

"Calm down, Murphy. Stop yelling, I haven't... Well because it almost killed Tofu!... No, he's fine now... No, we're more or less fine... It's not?... It's what!?... Oh... Fine... Fine! Jeez..." Cindy hung up. "Murphy wants the book."

"After what it did to Tofu?! Why?"

"It's part of a set apparently. Written by a guy who tried to predict Odd Summers."

"So he was insane is what you're saying."

"Yeah, but Murphy wants to read it. Says it can be used for other things... and she also said she would give us bad luck if we destroy it."

"Unbelievable."

Cindy shrugged, half-heartedly. "Yeah, but that's working with Villains for you. Honestly, I've, never heard her talk like that to me. Maybe the book is really that important. Look, I'll run it out to her and then we can go when you find the security footage. Tofu, are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm fine...but I may need to borrow that trash can, Mikey." I had to expel some waste. Too many micro units self-destructed.

"Alright. I'll be back in a bit."

Disappointing. I wanted that book destroyed, but I wasn't willing to anger Murphy to do it. The thought that some writing in a book could disable me just by looking at it was stressful, but making an enemy of Murphy would have rather terrible long-term repercussions, especially if I was understanding the full implications of her power. I could perhaps just kill her. I'd have easy access to her on the ride back, and she seemed worn out from using her power. I was pretty sure if I stabbed her brain it would halt her power from working... but she was a friend of Hellion. And Cindy. And my friends would probably react very poorly to me murdering Murphy right in front of them. I liked that my friends were overall non-violent, it was one of the main reasons I was friends with them, but I had to admit it was sometimes a chore to work around the fact. I'd have to set a hard reflex to avoid looking at strange math books, and test the resulting behavior, and formulate excuses in case someone watched me flinch away from a textbook, and set the contingencies so if I *did* need to look at a strange book it wouldn't cause a hiccup if it was during a fight, and create a better error bypass, and designate adequate paradox buffering, and etc.

Sigh. The things I do to avoid murder.

Oh well.

"Man, that book really hit you hard, huh," said Mikey as I finished 'throwing up'.

"Yes, but I'm fine now."

"Wonder why it was so bad for you. I just got really nauseous... and it felt like I was failing a math test **really** hard. Did you feel anything, Nicole?"

"Not really. I couldn't read it, but it was like I couldn't because it was too high level, or in another language maybe."

"I suspect it's because of the benedicci reaction phenomenon," I said. "I'm the only one of us without Benedicci bacteria."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Mikey.

"Benedicci seems to help with power-based math."

"Oh, I kinda remember hearing about that. So I guess it was like trying to fly a jet when you're still learning to ride a bike, then. I guess that explains why I threw up. My reaction is pretty low if I remember right. Guess that's why I didn't do so well in math class."

"High school math is well below the requirement of needing benedicci, Mikey."

"Ah, shut it you." He grinned and bapped his fist against my shoulder. "Since you're obviously feeling better, let's go find that footage."

Finding the security footage amounted to us following Nicole around while she tracked the signals emitted from the wireless security cameras. By the time Cindy got back to us, Nicole had determined that the storage wasn't in the intake building.

"This one is a dud too," Nicole sighed, closing the metal box bolted to

the wall. "Excellent wiring, though."

"Then I guess it's somewhere in the museum proper," said Cindy.

We crossed over to the main museum from the intake building through some doors that were cleverly disguised from the gallery side as some kind of... actually, I wasn't sure what this was.

"Is this a church?"

"It's supposed to be a temple. Egyptian maybe?... Oh, Mesopotamian. The sign is over there."

Mikey pointed to a plaque. It described the temple room as a "recreation based on one of the oldest known to humanity, as identified by Retrocognitionist Abdul-Ajax. While the creation of the glass desert resulted in the destruction of countless thousands of such sites, retrocognitionists and archaeologists have managed to recreate many of them to near-pristine conditions for your viewing pleasure. Sponsored by New Dawn Inc."

Huh. New Dawn Inc. Interesting.

We exited the 'temple' and emerged into an area of the museum that seemed dedicated to human history. Primitive history. There were pots, musical instruments, and tools from all over the world, all labeled as replicas and all from the 'iron age' at the earliest. Nothing even close to humanity's current technological level. Interestingly there were even masks, although none were labeled with the name of the person who had worn them, only the factions, or 'tribes' as humans called them, that made and used them. Apparently masks used to be communal before the beginning of Odd Summer? At least, it did not appear that their heroes wore them often. All depictions of individuals like Hercules, or King Arthur didn't have them, at least. The ones who looked like they might be wearing a mask, like Wukong or Anubis, instead turned out to be mutants? Or gods? I wasn't sure what the distinction between a god like Zeus and a super

like the Guardian was. Zeus could shapeshift and throw lightning, but the Guardian could fly and block fireballs with his bare hands. There was no real difference beyond 'one's a super and the other isn't'. Trying to understand how humans separated the two was confusing at best. I needed help beyond the unreliable internet. Luckily, I could ask my friends.

"Okay so basically," explained Cindy, "every super power you hear about before the first Odd Summer, back in two-thousand eighteen, is completely made up."

"All of them?"

"Yep. Like don't get me wrong, there were probably people who were pretty amazing, but at best it was exaggerated big time. There isn't a single recorded instance of superpowers before Odd Summer that can be verified with evidence."

"What about supers like The Avengers, or Batman?"

"Completely made up. Before Odd Summer it was all stories. Think of it like this, the stories aren't based on real superheroes, real superheroes modeled themselves off of those stories."

"Oh. So people like Hercules and Jesus didn't actually exist?"

"Ye- er, that last one... I mean, some of them might have been real people."

"So was Anubis a real person? And Santa Claus? Chuck Norris? Sarah Connor? What about the Easter Bunny?"

"I mean, I doubt they were **all** fake..."

"Is this why I haven't seen any churches or temples? Those gods are all made up?"

"Whoa, hold up, hold up. I'm uh, that is to say, I'm not an expert on this kinda, stuff. I don't know about all those people, Tofu, but there are some churches and mosques and stuff over in W10. It was the

designated culture district back in the day. There just aren't any in E13. Overlord was a 'my way or the highway' kinda guy, and he didn't have much patience for non-critical infrastructure. E13 never really picked up religion after his death... unless you count the Waller cult, and nobody does."

"I see. Isn't knowing which of these people is real important, though? Isn't it... dangerous, to not verify these things?"

"Ohhhh. Is that what's been bothering you?" asked Mikey. "Dude, you're not gonna get jumped by Anubis, or Santa Claus or whatever. Not unless some yahoo dressed like them is doing it. It's not worth worrying about ghosts and goblins of Christmas past when there's real supervillains around. You'll worry yourself silly."

"But, you said that your grandma would hit me if I didn't bring food."

That caused all three of my friends to pause, and the girls turned incredulous looks to Mikey.

"...I what now?"

"From beyond the grave. You said she'd hit people who don't bring food when visiting. Lots of mythological beings have such rules."

"Oh, Jesus." He slapped his forehead. "Dude, I promise, my grandma will never, *ever* hit you."

"Really?"

"Really, really. You don't have to follow any mythological rules. If we did, half this city would be smote, and the other half would be smote'd even harder."

"Okay... then I have a follow-up question."

"Shoot."

"Can I steal some of these obsidian knives?" They had a set of five in a case which the plaque claimed were **exact** replicas of sacrificial daggers used in the worship of a south american 'loa'.

"...Go for it."

Nicole disarmed the case alarm for me, which was nice of her considering she didn't really approve of stealing. Cindy told me more history about loas, and with Mikey's assurance, I could enjoy my new knives without worrying that I wasn't a priest of the deity they were intended for.

My friends are great. Well worth the effort of avoiding murder.